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living and learning for a viable future:
the power of adult learning

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**Harnessing the power and potential
of adult learning and education
for a viable future**

Belém Framework for Action

Preliminary Draft

1. Five International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEA I-V) since 1949 have called the world's attention to adult education as a fundamental human right. Today, faced with unresolved, as well as new challenges, adult learning and education are more important than ever as an empowering tool to release the creative potential of people and communities and as a critical resource that adds to the well-being of our nations.

2. Following the *Nairobi Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education* of 1976, further developed by the *Hamburg Declaration* of 1997, we reaffirm that adult learning is a key component of lifelong learning that “denotes the entire body of ongoing learning processes, formal or otherwise, whereby people regarded as adults by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, and improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction to meet their own needs and those of their society”.

3. At a time of expanding globalization, new opportunities have arisen for the world but also new challenges, conflicts and barriers. Amidst the structural socio-economic shifts and growing uncertainties in daily life, knowledge economies are emerging with new work environments, new forms of social organization and channels of communication, which make the demands for updating and adapting our collective and individual skills and competences ever more urgent. In addition, and as we formulate these recommendations, the world has been hit by an unprecedented economic and financial crisis, which questions the very foundations of our established social, economic and educational systems and philosophies.

4. We, the XXX Member States of UNESCO, representatives of civil society organizations, social partners, United Nations agencies and the private sector, have gathered in Belém do Pará in Brazil in May 2009 as participants of the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) to take forward the agenda of adult learning and education. We are convinced that adult learning and education can provide people with the necessary capabilities, skills and competences to exercise and advance their rights, take control of their destiny, contribute to equity and inclusion, help to end poverty and build equitable, tolerant and sustainable societies. We recall once more the CONFINTEA V Hamburg Declaration of 1997 that adult learning is a right, a tool, a joy and a shared responsibility. We recognize the need to achieve the agendas of education for all, the Millennium Development Goals and education for sustainable development. We therefore resolve to adopt this **Belém Framework for Action** to guide us in harnessing the power and potential of adult learning and education for a viable future.

Recommendations and strategies

5. Convinced and inspired by the critical role of adult learning and education in addressing global and educational issues and challenges, acknowledging our achievements and progress since CONFINTEA V yet cognisant of the challenges we are still confronted with, and recognising that the fulfilment of the right to education for adults and young people is conditioned by considerations of policy, governance, financing, participation, inclusion, equity and quality as outlined in the annexed **Statement of Evidence**, we are determined to pursue the following recommendations and strategies.

Policy: towards lifelong learning

6. Policies and legislative measures for adult education need to be comprehensive, inclusive and integrated within a lifelong and life-wide learning perspective, with literacy as the point of departure, based on sector-wide and intersectoral approaches, covering and linking all components of learning and education.

To these ends, we commit ourselves to:

- (a) implementing an integrated adult learning and education policy within a framework of lifelong learning;

- (b) designing specific and concrete action plans for adult learning and education which are integrated with EFA, UNLD, MDG as well as other national and regional development plans, and with LIFE activities where those exist;
- (c) ensuring that adult learning and education are included in the “ONE United Nations” initiative;
- (d) establishing appropriate coordination mechanisms, which could include monitoring committees involving all stakeholders active in adult learning and education;
- (e) developing or improving structures and mechanisms for the recognition, validation and accreditation of all forms of learning, by establishing equivalency frameworks such as frameworks for qualifications that encompass informal and non-formal learning.

Governance

7. Good governance facilitates the implementation of adult learning and education policy in ways which are effective, transparent, accountable and equitable. Representation and participation by all stakeholders are indispensable for responsiveness to the needs of all learners, in particular the least powerful.

To these ends, we commit ourselves to:

- (a) creating and maintaining mechanisms for the involvement of public authorities at all administrative levels, civil society organizations, social partners, the private sector, community and adult learners’ organizations in the development, implementation and evaluation of adult learning and education policies and programmes;
- (b) undertaking capacity-building measures to support the constructive and informed involvement of civil society organizations, community and adult learners’ organizations in policy and programme development, implementation and evaluation;
- (c) promoting and supporting intersectoral and inter-ministerial cooperation.

Financing

8. Adult learning and education are a valuable investment which brings social benefits by creating more democratic, peaceful, inclusive, productive, healthy and sustainable societies. Significant financial investment is essential to ensure quality provision of adult learning and education.

To these ends, we commit ourselves to:

- (a) implementing the CONFINTEA V agreement to allocate at least 6% of GNP to education, and increasing the allocation to adult learning and education;
- (b) pooling and applying existing educational resources and budgets across all government departments to meet the objectives of an integrated adult learning and education strategy;
- (c) creating incentives to promote new sources of funding, such as from the private sector, NGOs, communities and individuals, without prejudicing the principles of equity and inclusion;
- (d) prioritizing investment for women and rural populations in lifelong learning.

In support of these strategies, we call upon international development partners to:

- (e) meet their commitment to filling the financial gaps that prevent the achievement of all EFA Goals, in particular Goals 3 and 4 (youth and adult learning, adult literacy);
- (f) increase funds for adult literacy, learning and education in their aid programmes (including debt swap or cancellation, the creation of a designated transnational fund for adult literacy and the incorporation of adult literacy into the EFA Fast Track Initiative).

Participation, inclusion and equity

9. Inclusive education is fundamental to the achievement of human, social and economic development. The development of the potential of all citizens contributes significantly to living together in harmony and with dignity. There can be no exclusion arising from age, gender, ethnicity, language, religion, disability, rurality, sexual identity or orientation, poverty or displacement through conflict or imprisonment. Combating the cumulative effects of multiple disadvantage is of particular importance.

To these ends, we commit ourselves to:

- (a) promoting and supporting more equitable access to, and participation in, adult learning and education through well-designed targeting activities and programmes such as Adult Learners' Weeks and learning festivals;
- (b) anticipating and responding to identifiable groups entering trajectories of multiple disadvantage, in particular in early adulthood;
- (c) developing materials and teaching and learning methods which recognize and value indigenous and local knowledge, methodologies and mother-tongues in adult learning and education programmes;
- (d) improving access to and participation in the full range of adult learning and education programmes for women, taking account of their particular demands the gender-specific life course;
- (e) supporting financially a systematic focus on disadvantaged groups (for example indigenous peoples, migrants, people with special needs and those living in rural areas) in all educational policies and approaches, and ensuring that such programmes are provided free of charge or subsidised by our governments, with incentives for learning such as bursaries, fee remission and paid study leave.

Adult literacy

10. Literacy is an essential basic skill and a key competence for active citizenship in all parts of the world. It evolves and is embedded in everyday life, working life and civic life. Literacy is continuously shaped and reshaped by the evolving complexities of culture, economy and society. Adult education definitively extends beyond adult literacy, but adult literacy is imperative for people to engage in meaningful learning. It is a prerequisite for personal, social and political emancipation. Given the magnitude of the literacy challenge it is vital to redouble our efforts to ensure that adult literacy is increased by 50 per cent by 2015 – the benchmark of EFA Goal 4, which is also the aim of the UNLD and LIFE.

To these ends, we commit ourselves to:

- (a) mobilizing internal and external resources and expertise to help countries with high illiteracy rates to carry out large-scale literacy programmes with greater range,

coverage and quality to reduce sharply the global figure of adults with low levels of functional literacy;

- (b) targeting literacy interventions at highly disadvantaged populations to acquire, maintain and improve literacy, numeracy, language, and ICT competences;
- (c) launching a vigorous international effort to reduce the persistently high number of adults without literacy skills within the time line agreed upon in EFA, UNLD and LIFE.

Quality

11. Quality in learning and education is a multidimensional concept and practice that demands constant attention and continuous development. Fostering a culture of quality in adult learning requires relevance of content and modes of delivery, learner-centred needs assessment, acquisition of multiple competences, professionalization of educators, the enrichment of learning environments and the empowerment of individuals and communities.

To these ends, we commit ourselves to:

- (a) developing quality criteria for curricula, learning materials and teaching methodologies in adult education programmes, taking account of outcomes and impact measures;
- (b) improving training, capacity-building and professionalization of adult educators, including through partnership with higher education institutions;
- (c) lending greater support to systematic interdisciplinary research in adult learning and education, complemented by knowledge management systems for collection, analysis and dissemination of data and good practice.

Monitoring implementation of the Belém Framework for Action

12. Drawing strength from our collective will to reinvigorate adult learning and education in our countries and internationally, we commit ourselves to the following accountability and monitoring measures. We acknowledge the need for valid and reliable quantitative and qualitative data to inform our policy-making in adult learning and education. Working with our partners to design and implement regular recording and tracking mechanisms at national and international levels is paramount in realizing the Belém Framework for Action.

To these ends, we commit ourselves to:

- (a) collecting and analysing data and information regularly on participation and progression in adult education programmes to evaluate change over time and to share good practice;
- (b) establishing a regular monitoring mechanism in each country to assess the implementation of the commitments to CONFINTEA VI;
- (c) initiating regional monitoring mechanisms with clear benchmarks and indicators;
- (d) producing a national progress report to a CONFINTEA VI Mid-Term Review coinciding with the EFA and MDGs timeline of 2015.

To support the follow-up and monitoring at international level, we call upon UNESCO:

- (e) to provide support to Member States by designing and developing an open access knowledge management system to compile data and case studies of good practice, to which Member States themselves will contribute;
- (f) to coordinate, through the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in partnership with the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, a monitoring process at global level to take stock and report periodically on progress in adult learning and education;
- (g) to produce, on this basis, the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (GRALE) at regular intervals.
- (h) To review and update the *Nairobi Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education* (1976).

ANNEX

Statement of Evidence

Addressing global and educational issues and challenges

1. Adult learning and education have a critical role in responding to contemporary cultural, economic, political and social challenges. Our globalized world has paved the way for many opportunities, among them the possibility of learning from rich and diverse cultures that transcend geographical boundaries. However, widening inequalities have become dominant features of our era. Much of the world's population lives in poverty, with 43.5% subsisting on less than US \$2 a day. The majority of the world's poor lives in rural areas. Demographic imbalances, with burgeoning young populations in the South and ageing populations in the North, are exacerbated by large-scale migration from poor to rich areas – within and between countries – and influxes of significant numbers of displaced people. We are confronted with unequal access to food, water and energy, and ecological degradation threatens our very existence long term. Alongside material privation is the all-too-frequently observed poverty of capabilities that prevents effective functioning in society. The prospect for too many of today's children is one of youth unemployment, while a growing number of socially, economically and politically “detached” young people feel that they have no stake in society.

2. We face structural shifts in production and labour markets, growing insecurities and anxieties in everyday life, difficulties in achieving mutual understanding, and now a deepening world economic and financial crisis. At the same time globalization and the knowledge economy force us to update and adapt our skills and competences for new work environments, forms of social organization and channels of communication. These issues, and our urgent collective and individual learning demands, question the foundations of our established educational systems and philosophies.

3. In many countries adult literacy still remains a major challenge: 774 million adults (two-thirds of whom are women) lack basic literacy skills, and there is insufficient provision of effective literacy and life-skills programmes. In Europe virtually a third of the workforce has only the equivalent of lower secondary education, whereas two-thirds of new jobs require qualifications at upper secondary level or above. In many countries of the South the majority of the population does not even attain primary school level. In 2006 some 75 million children (the majority of whom were girls) had either left school early or had never attended school. Nearly half of these children were from sub-Saharan Africa and more than 80% were rural children. The lack of social relevance of educational curricula, the inadequate numbers and training of educators, and the paucity of innovative materials and methods all undermine the ability of existing educational systems to provide quality learning that can address the disparities in our societies.

4. There have been concerted international efforts to address these challenges. Progress has been achieved towards the six Education for All (EFA) goals (2000) through government-led cooperation with United Nations agencies, civil society organizations, private providers and donors. Increasing resources were made available through the EFA Fast Track Initiative for universal primary education. The United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) (2003-2012) provides support to achieve EFA's literacy goal through worldwide advocacy and awareness-raising. The Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) gives a global framework within UNLD to support countries with the greatest literacy needs. Two of the Millennium Development Goals (2000) explicitly address education: achieving universal primary education and gender parity. However, in none of these efforts has there been a designated role for adult learning and education beyond basic literacy and life skills. Encouragingly, the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) sets out a broad mandate in which adult learning and education can play a highly visible role.

5. Adult learning and education are a critical and necessary response to the challenges that confront us. It is a key component of a holistic and comprehensive lifelong learning and

educational system which integrates formal, non-formal and informal learning and which addresses explicitly or implicitly both youth and adult learners. Ultimately adult learning and education are about providing learning contexts and processes that are attractive and responsive to the needs of adults as active citizens. It is about developing self-reliant, autonomous individuals, building and rebuilding their lives in complex and rapidly-changing cultures, societies and economies – at work, in the family and in community and social life. The need to move to different kinds of work in the course of a lifetime, the adaptation to new contexts in situations of displacement or migration, the importance of entrepreneurial initiative and the capacity to sustain improvements in the quality of life – these and other dimensions of socio-economic circumstances all call for continuing learning throughout adult life. Adult learning and education not only offer specific competences, but are also a key factor in boosting self-confidence, self-esteem, a settled sense of identity and mutual support.

6. It is estimated today that for every single year that the average level of education of the adult population is raised there is a corresponding increase of 3.7% in long-term economic growth and a 6% increase in per capita income. Nevertheless, adult learning and education are much more than an item of social spending or financial expenditure. They are an investment in hope for the future.

Progress in adult learning and education since CONFITEA V

7. National reports submitted by 150 Member States in readiness for CONFITEA VI and discussion on effective practice during the regional preparatory conferences have shown some progress and innovation in adult learning and education within a perspective of lifelong learning. Apart from the recent example of the European Union Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, a few Member States in the South have introduced comprehensive adult learning and education policies and legislation and some have even enshrined adult learning and education in their constitutions. Systematic approaches to adult learning and education, guided by policy frameworks, are being developed, and there have been instances of landmark policy reforms.

8. Literacy plans, programmes and campaigns have been reactivated and accelerated in some Member States. The period 2000-2006 saw an increase in global adult literacy rates from 76% to 84%. Progress was especially marked in the developing countries. Some governments have actively sought to work with civil society to provide non-formal learning opportunities in approaches such as *faire-faire*, with a wide range of content, objectives and target groups. The provision of non-formal education has diversified, covering topics such as human rights, citizenship, democracy, women's empowerment, HIV prevention, health, environmental protection and sustainable development. Advocacy events such as Adult Learners' Weeks and learning festivals, as well as comprehensive movements, for instance learning cities and learning regions, are contributing substantially to adult learning and education.

9. There has been some convincing evidence and increased recognition among Member States of the benefits of gender-sensitive provision in adult learning and education, particularly with respect to women. Information and communications technologies and open and distance learning are being embraced and are slowly responding to the specific needs of learners who up to very recently have been excluded. Mother-tongue learning is addressed increasingly in national policies in multilingual and multicultural contexts, although comprehensive policies are in place only in some of them.

10. Systems of information, documentation, monitoring and evaluation of adult learning and education programmes have been introduced. Effective instruments and systems of recognition, validation and accreditation of learning are gradually being put in place, including quality assurance bodies and procedures. Creating synergies between formal, non-formal and informal learning and education has proven to yield better results for both individual learners and systems as existing resources and competencies are more effectively used.

11. Adult learning flourishes with decisive initiatives of states in alliance with key institutions of civil society, the corporate sector and workers' associations. Public-private partnerships are gaining currency; and South-South and triangular cooperation are yielding tangible results in forging a new adult learning for sustainable development, peace and democracy. Regional and supranational bodies and agencies play crucial and transformative roles, influencing and complementing states.

Challenges for adult learning and education

12. Despite this progress, the national reports and the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (GRALE) produced for CONFINTEA VI show new social and educational challenges that have emerged alongside existing problems, some of which have worsened in the interim, nationally, regionally and globally. Crucially, the expectation that we would rebuild and reinforce adult learning and education in the wake of CONFINTEA V has not been met.

13. The role and place of adult learning and education in lifelong learning continue to be underplayed. At the same time policy domains outside of education have failed to recognize and integrate the distinctive contributions that adult learning and education can offer for broader economic, social and human development. It remains a fragmented field. Advocacy effort is dissipated across a number of fronts, and political credibility is diluted precisely because the very disparate nature of adult learning and education prevents their close identification with any one social policy arena. The frequent absence of adult education from the agendas of government agencies is matched by scant inter-ministerial cooperation, weak organizational structures and poor links between education (formal and non-formal) and other sectors. With regard to recognition and accreditation of learning, both in-country mechanisms and international efforts place undue emphasis on formally accredited skills and competences, seldom including non-formal, informal and experiential learning. The gap between policy and implementation is widened when policy development is undertaken in isolation, without external participation or input (from the field, from institutes of higher education).

14. Far-sighted and adequate financial planning is not sufficiently in place for adult learning and education to make telling contributions to our future. Furthermore, the current and growing trend of decentralisation in decision-making is not always matched by adequate financial allocations at all levels, or by appropriate delegation of budgetary authority. Adult learning and education have not figured strongly in the aid strategy of international donors and has not been subject to ongoing efforts in donor coordination and harmonization. Debt relief has not, so far, markedly benefited adult learning and education.

15. Although we are witnessing an increasing variety of adult learning and education programmes, the primary focus of such provision is now on vocational and professional education and training. More integrated approaches to adult learning and education to address development in all its aspects (economic, sustainable, community and personal) are missing. Gender mainstreaming initiatives have not always led to more relevant programmes for or greater participation by women. Similarly, adult learning and education programmes are rarely responsive to indigenous people, rural populations and migrants. The diversity of learners, in terms of age, gender, cultural background, economic status, unique needs, including disabilities, and language, is not reflected in programme content and practices. Few countries have consistent multilingual policies promoting mother tongues, yet this is often crucial for creating a literate environment, especially for indigenous and/or minority languages.

16. At best referred to only in the broadest terms, adult learning and education feature sparingly in many international education agendas and recommendations, and are often viewed as a synonym for basic literacy acquisition. Nevertheless, literacy is indisputably a dimension of immense consequence, and the continuing enormity of the literacy challenge presents an indictment of the inadequate adoption of the measures and initiatives launched in recent years.

Persistently high illiteracy rates question whether enough has been done politically and financially by governments and international agencies.

17. The lack of professionalization and training opportunities for educators has had a detrimental impact on the quality of adult learning and education provision, as has the impoverished fabric of the learning environment, in terms of equipment, materials and curricula. Only rarely are needs assessment and research conducted on a systematic basis in the planning process to determine appropriate content, pedagogy, mode of delivery and supporting infrastructure. Neither are monitoring, evaluation and feedback mechanisms a consistent feature of the quality landscape in adult learning and education. Where they do exist, their levels of sophistication are subject to the tension of balancing quality against quantity of provision.

18. This **Statement of Evidence** provides the underpinning rationale for the recommendations and strategies as outlined above in the **Belém Framework for Action**.