WEBINAR

ADULT LEARNING & EDUCATION CENTRAL TO RESPONDING UNDER COVID-19

APRIL 29, 2020

CO-CONVENED BY ASPBAE & PRIA INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY

The global spread of COVID-19 pandemic has caused huge impacts on the lives of millions around the world. In response, citizens and communities have been asked to adopt hygienic practices of washing hands, covering their faces, etc. as well as the new normal of physical (euphemistically labelled social) distancing. For many communities, these are new behaviours; for many poorer and vulnerable families, these are constrained behaviours.

In addition to these, reliance on digital technology for learning, schooling and other forms of education is resulting in further distancing and exclusion of the poor, rural and semi-literate populations. Girls and women face particular vulnerabilities in such situations.

As the central idea of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) lies in the belief that learning is at the heart of changing individuals and communities, ALE can play a central role in responding under COVID-19.

As practitioners in this field, there is a need to disseminate the correct information in the society, communicate with our learners to realise their needs and to urge the policy makers and institutions to ensure quality, equity and inclusivity while transitioning towards digital learning.

KEY MESSAGES

As the pandemic continues to impact lives across the globe, Adult Learning and Education (ALE) practitioners need to step in to help the community face both, the existing problems as well as those which may arise while adapting to the post pandemic future.

- **Building local capacity:**

The current crisis across the globe has been pushing the primary action locally. Stories from different parts of the world have depicted how the local governments, local actors and local communities have dealt with the pandemic first-hand, responding in an effective and efficient manner.

The local has been, and will remain, the first port of call when any emergency strikes. Thus, highlighting the significance of the local and the need to build this local competence and capacity. It is in this endeavor that adult learning and education practitioners can step in by providing their services to build upon the present base of local knowledge and skills such that the community is equipped to face crises which may arise in the future.

- **Building the infrastructure for digitalisation:**

Given the encouragement to maintain physical distancing under the current circumstances, digitalisation is a measure which cannot be avoided. While there exists certain challenges such as the lack of hardware, competence and preparedness associated with digitalisation in the space of adult learning, one should not avoid using digital means.

As the pandemic poses new challenges to one and all, this can be used as an opportunity to build on the presently available resources and use the digital tools by adapting them to the needs of the practitioner. Furthermore, as adult learning recognises that the individual holds knowledge, one can try to utilise technology to reach out the learners, understand their needs and share the knowledge which they have with them.

- **Advocating for equitable and inclusive access to education:**

With lockdowns initiated in several parts of the world and the resultant shift towards online learning, UNESCO reported that 1.3 billion learners have been impacted. One of the key problem areas has been the inability of students to access the digital learning platforms either due to the lack of hardware such as computers and internet facility or due to the sheer lack of capacity.

Thus, a critical challenge with the shift to the virtual modality of education has been that of ensuring equity, quality and inclusion. There is a dire need to address this

matter, especially as it seems that online learning would continue to prevail post pandemic.

It is critical that those in the ALE field urge the State to think about these matters and push for the diversification of the modes of learning towards more accessible options such as radios, televisions and mobile phones.

- **Advocating for public provisioning of digital learning:**

There is a need to ensure that digital learning platforms and technology does not undergo corporatisation. The capture of the digital learning market by private players will result in expanding the current digital gap and the homogenisation of content, thus leading to ineffective learning which is accessible only by certain sections of the society.

It is highly critical to demand public provisioning of this infrastructure to ensure affordable and contextual learning.

- **Building capacity of the teachers and facilitators:**

While the shift from offline to online learning has left a massive impact on the students, one also needs to recognize the mark it has left on the teachers. Under the current situation, teachers and freelance facilitators are left highly vulnerable. It has pushed them towards shifting to other fields such that they can earn their livelihoods.

There is a need to guide and build the capacities of the teachers such that they can face the 'new normal' of online learning.

- **Investing in developing participatory learning methodology:**

As the present shift to online learning seems to be one which will continue in the future, it is highly critical that we do not abandon the human interaction component present in the teaching and learning process. As skill learning requires practice, there is a need to invest in developing participatory learning methodology with technology.

Dr. Rajesh Tandon

Founder-President, PRIA
Co-Chair, UNESCO Chair in Community Based
Research & Social Responsibility in Higher Education

The pandemic in its reach has extended to all corners of the world. While some parts have been impacted more than the others, none has been left untouched. Each day we witness visuals from various parts of the world, depicting how our lives, institutions and communities have been disrupted.

With the onset of the pandemic, we have been pushed towards learning new ways of behaving- whether it is in the form of hygienic practices or with the new normal of social distancing. This is further accompanied with the transition to 'working from home'.

It is critical for us to realise that we are a part of the privileged class who have homes, spaces within our homes, the infrastructure and capacity which allows us to work from home. Not all in the country have this capacity. In India specifically, we have witnessed the plight of the migrant workers early on with the enforcement of the lockdown.

The circulation of wrong information and the misconceptions attached with the pandemic has created confusion and panic amongst the most vulnerable in the community.

It is during this challenging time that individuals who believe in adult education, who believe in learning as the basis of changing individuals and communities, need to step up.

As we witness a shift towards digital learning, it has been realised that only certain sections of learners have able to access this form of learning.

Thus, efforts to urge the policy makers and institutions to think about equity and inclusion needs to be at the forefront. Furthermore, this form of digital learning has been promoted solely in mainstream languages. As adult education practitioners, we know that this needs to change as language needs to be local such that it is understood, let alone acted upon.

In terms of the future, we need to help the people in understanding the new normal.

At this critical stage, we need to harvest and mobilise our expertise, practitioners, knowledge institutions and the grassroot organisations in order to respond to the pandemic.

Ms. Maria Lourdes Almazan Khan

Secretary General
Asia South-Pacific Association of Basic and Adult
Education, Philippines/India

As the pandemic has affected the entire world, Ms. Khan shared some statistics to highlight the gravity of the situation. Currently, 3 million people have been affected by the virus and 265 million are at the brink of starvation. On the front of education, 1.3 billion learners have been affected by the closure of educational institutions.

She further shared stories from the field that ASPBAE had come across during their' consultations with youth partners. These describe the challenges faced by the marginalised communities:

- Food deprivation:
While there have been several efforts by governments and private organisations to respond to the food shortages faced by communities, it has been witnessed that there

has been an uneven reach of the formal public distribution system. Remote communities and individuals with inadequate documentation are still facing issues in availing these services.

- Fear for health:
With the circulation of fake news in the society, there exists a certain fear amongst the people regarding the access to public health facilities. This is further accompanied by stress and anxiety issues.

- Loss of income and livelihood:
Stories shared by some of the youth partners reflect how they are facing a double burden- the loss of their education as well as loss of livelihood. The great push of online learning has left them unable to continue their education. This, they fear, will continue post the pandemic as well, as their primary focus would remain in restoring their livelihood and income sources.

- Rise in Violence:
Under the cover of the pandemic, human rights & democratic spaces have taken a beating. Several areas have witnessed a rise in alcoholism and domestic violence cases.

Ms. Khan shared how countries which had prioritized lifelong learning systems within public provisioning have been able to respond to the pandemic in creative ways by utilizing Adult Learning (AL) tools. For the developing countries, a lot has fallen on the laps of the NGOs and CSOs in terms of the community-based responses to the crisis.

She shared some of the initiatives that ASPBAE has undertaken to face these challenges. One of them has been in dealing with the fake news and acting as channels of information dissemination about government schemes and how one can access them.

On the front of advocacy work, the organisation has been engaging with governments, especially with those who are grappling with impacts of closures and looking at online/distance learning such that there is a more equitable access towards these.

Ms. Khan further discussed how there could be greater policy advocacy for flexible learning, wherein the education system provides and values informal, non-formal and formal learning. With the shift of teaching in schools to that in households and with parents now adopting the role of facilitators, there is room for policy appreciation of intergenerational learning as well. It has been realised that there is a need to build the capacity of parents to prepare them as they face the added responsibility of now acting as teachers.

One critical challenge faced with the current shift to the virtual modality of education was highlighted by Ms. Khan - the challenge of ensuring equity, quality and inclusion. She highlighted the need to diversify the options of distance learning, shifting to more accessible modes such as radios, televisions and mobile phones.

As it seems that online education will remain even in the future, one needs to ensure that the corporatization of digital learning technology and platforms does not take place as this would only expand the existent digital divide.

Ms. Zulminarni Hidjazi Arsyad (Nani)

President, ASPBAE & Director , PEKKA (Perempuan Kepala Keluarga),Indonesia

Reflecting on what the impact of the current pandemic has brought to the forefront, Ms. Arsyad shared the learning needs that she believes must be strengthened in the field.

- **Learn to Know about COVID-19**

Ms. Arsyad shared how the policy of social distancing was enforced in Indonesia, affecting each individual in the country. Many did not understand what COVID-19 was, how they could be affected by it, why social distancing was required or how it was to be practiced. This reflected the lack of proper information present amongst the community regarding the pandemic as well as the practices that should be adopted. Thus, there is a need to raise awareness about these topics amongst the community.

- **Learn to Do**

With the closure of educational institutions and the informal sector, there was need for the communities to learn how to survive- how to earn their livelihood as their main businesses shut down. There was need to change the perception of the poorer sections of the communities and push them towards looking at non-traditional livelihood options. Furthermore, with the parents now adopting the role of mentors and teachers for their children, there

was a need to facilitate conversations with them, listening to their queries and guiding them into this new role.

• Learn to Be

As the lockdown forces individuals within the bounds of their homes, increase in the anxiety and stress levels has been witnessed. There is a further added burden with the loss of daily income and increasing expenses. Thus, there is a need to look into how we can facilitate and organise the community to survive and ensure that their mental health remains strong.

• Learn to Live Together

We need to learn how to share and care for one another given the new situation. Ms. Arsyad shared a positive observation from Indonesia of how individuals, CSOs and NGOs stepped in to help and support the poor even before the response of the government.

• Learn to Rebuild

There is a need to build a new normal life system. Ms. Arsyad shared how we need to learn to rebuild our lives by enabling the framework of lifelong learning such that social justice can become a reality.
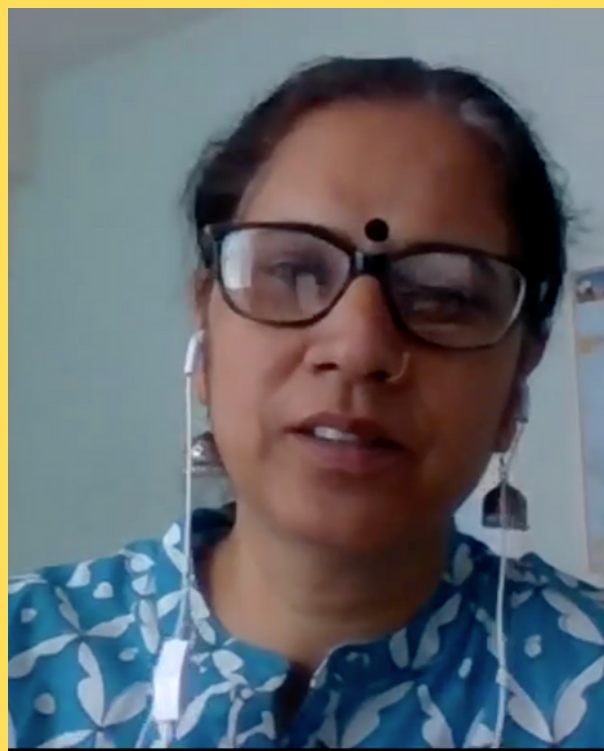
Ms. Archana Dwivedi
Director
Nirantar Trust, India

Describing the various initiatives undertaken by Nirantar in response to the pandemic, Ms. Dwivedi elaborated that the first response by the women and girls who volunteered with the organisation was to conduct a community mapping. This community mapping exercise was undertaken with the purpose of understanding the problems faced on ground. The women and girls, equipped through the earlier undertaken digital literacy intervention by Nirantar,

utilised the means of audio, video and photographs to share information about the situation in their neighbourhoods. It was through this exercise that the on-ground reality was realised.

It further brought to light the problems faced by these volunteers, how they required support not just in terms of learning digital and technological skills but also in terms of the access to hardware.

While there have been many responses by the government to provide essential services to those in need, it came to light that most of these government services and entitlements could only be accessed through online forms. This created a problem for those who did not have the required facility or the capacity to do so. Nirantar mobilised their volunteers to step in and fill these forms for those in need.

Ms. Dwivedi touched upon the fear and anxiety existing within the community, caused by the inability of people to screen the correct information about COVID-19.

With the aim of sharing the correct information and dissuading the fake news, Nirantar began an initiative of producing podcasts in local languages.

She further shared that one of the biggest challenges faced by the organisation came with the shift to the online mode. With majority of their work in the print form, the challenge lay in converting this material into digital form while making sure that it remains relevant and contextual.

Ms. Dwivedi emphasized on the need to create safe learning spaces for women and girls in the present times- one which allows them to share their thoughts and interact freely.

Dr. Uwe Gartenschlaeger
Deputy Director
DVV International

Dr. Gartenschlaeger shared certain challenges in the space of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) which the current pandemic has highlighted.

- Digitalisation

Dr. Gartenschlaeger shared how one cannot avoid the topic of digitalisation when it comes to ALE and how one should not avoid it. He shared certain challenges present with digitalisation such as:

1. Lack of hardware with both the providers and participants.
2. Lack of competencies of using this hardware by the trainers and staff
3. Lack of preparedness of public sector on the front of digital learning (this lies relevant as most of the funding for ALE comes from public sources)

- Sustainability of the sector

With the crisis hitting the small and medium size organisations hard, it is expected that these service providers will not survive the pandemic. The crisis further puts at risk the freelance trainers - pushing them out of this space to pursue other tasks in order to earn their livelihood. As both, the organisations and freelance facilitators, remain a critical part of the ALE system, there is a need to fight this tendency.

- Outreach

There also exists the challenge of the difficulty in reaching out to specific target groups such as the elderly and the migrants. There is a risk of losing these individuals with the current pandemic.

On a more political note, Dr. Gartenschlaeger discussed how we are witnessing the renationalisation of politics.

With the onset of the pandemic, the first reaction of governments has been to close the borders, severing links built over decades and prioritizing the needs of their nation. In the time of an emergency such as the present, it is essential to show solidarity with one another and work together.

Ms. Nandita Bhatt
Director- Operations
Martha Farrell Foundation

Ms. Bhatt shared her experience and the work undertaken by Martha Farrell Foundation (MFF). As the organisation has been working with the domestic workers in the National Capital Region (NCR) of India, she shared how the same fears and panic that Ms. Dwivedi discussed was prevalent amongst these women. She further mentioned how with the lockdown, there had been a rise in the domestic violence cases across the country.

During this time of duress, MFF has undertaken the role of collating information about the localities where no essential services have reached and connecting these areas with the service providers.

It has also been disseminating information regarding helpline numbers, the numbers of authorities such as the district collectors of various regions as well as guiding the women through the process of contacting these authorities.

COMMENTS FROM PARTICIPANTS

Ms. Lalita Ramdas
Former President, International Council of Adult Education (ICAE)

- Nationalisation and renationalisation.

There is a concern about the growth of unhealthy and discriminatory positions which unfortunately has been aided by media. Adult education needs to consciously and regularly address and challenge this.

- Infrastructure development

If we expect that the future is one which is dependent on the digital medium, there is a need for development of proper infrastructure. This partly is dependent on the State, but it also needs to be advocated for by the people.

- Sharing of best practices

There are several excellent activities which are currently being conducted on the ground level. There is a need to collect this information and share it within the network.

Dr. Sandy Morrison
Former president, ASPBAE

We cannot think of one crisis on its own, there is a need to think and prepare ourselves for multi-crisis situations which may occur in the future. Thus, there is a need for solid governance structure as well.

Dr. Jose Roberto Guevara
Incoming President, ICAE & Former President, ASPBAE

While the technology is important, there is a need for us practitioners to think about how this technology can be used to reach out to the learners and how it can be used to share their knowledge amongst one and all.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

With the onset of the current pandemic, it was witnessed that local actors, local government and local communities responded quickly and effectively, thus depicting the significance of the local. With the local being the first port of call when an emergency prevails, there is a need to build this local competence. Adult learning and education can play a pivotal role in this line of building the capacities of the community members.

It has also been witnessed, especially in the developing countries, that with the rise in the dependence on technology, private providers are stepping in to capture the digital learning market. This would only lead to homogenization of content. As learning happens contextually, this homogenization will not result in effective learning. Thus, there is a need to demand public accountability and public investment in this infrastructure. The public provision of digital learning would in turn ensure that learning happens in a more affordable and equitable manner.

Another aspect that has often remained an after-thought under the current situation has been that of the vulnerability of the teachers. There is a need to reach out to them and prepare them through capacity building interventions to face this 'new normal' of online learning.

Lastly, as there is a shift from the offline mode of learning to the online, we witness the need to invest in developing participatory learning methodology with technology. Skill learning requires practice and practice in turn occurs only with context. Thus, one cannot and should not abandon face to face interactive learning.