

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF MALAWI'S CONTRIBUTION TO ADULT EDUCATION



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Introduction

Adult Education is generally understood to include a range of activities designed for the purposes of supporting learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception defines them as adults (Nafukho, Amutabi and Otunga: 2005).

Adult educators often look at adults as agents of change and as architects of development of their communities. Thus adults are perceived as continuous learners, constructors of knowledge and actors in pursuit of building and sustaining livelihoods and the well-being of their communities. Educational and learning activities associated with these include formal sector learning in schools, colleges and other agencies providing various courses; non-formal learning which provides education and training outside the formal education system; and informal learning provided by informal groups and agencies.

Adult Learning and Education (ALE) in Malawi has been in existence for a long time and has largely focused on the informal sector, where skills and training were provided to members of communities as part of socialisation processes. These learnings were linked to the indigenous education systems which involved, amongst others, older members of the community teaching youth and children how to be good members of the community and equipping them with other skills for sustainability and survival. In Malawi, informal adult education, also known

as extra-mural adult learning, included activities that can be traced back to 1947 when the British Government, in cooperation with UNESCO, launched literacy classes in the Dowa district. Since then, the main role-player and stakeholder in literacy activities has been the government, supported by other stakeholders including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and religious organisations. These classes, spread out across various districts in Malawi, were oriented towards providing 'illiterate' adults and youths with 'second-chance' learning opportunities because they had missed out on formal education (NALEP, 2020). These classes are spread out in various districts across the country.

Narrow ALE focus on 3 Rs deters adult learners

Today, adult literacy remains an important educational matter. The 5th Integrated Household Survey (2020) shows that Malawi has a literacy rate of 75.5 percent among people aged 15 years and above. This rate is higher for males, at 83 percent, than for females at 68.8 percent. Analysis by place of residence shows that 98.1 percent of individuals in urban areas are literate compared to 72.1 percent in rural areas. Preliminary results for Malawi's 2018 Population and Housing Census revealed that 84 percent of the population lives in rural areas. This calls for more adult learning and education initiatives to be channelled to these parts of the country.

One of the main challenges that ALE programmes face is the need to re-conceptualise ALE, especially in the context of climate change, economic crises and ongoing local struggles. The understanding of ALE has historically been narrowly focused on literacy –



CUNIMA students and members of Chivu Cooperative discuss macadamia nut farming

the 3Rs. This narrow view of literacy has resulted in a lack of interest amongst those who may already have acquired the basic skills associated with reading and writing. In other cases, people who may have missed out on education do not want to be seen as 'illiterate' members of society because of the negative connotations associated with it.

More importantly, many community members prefer ALE activities that have a more immediate and direct impact on their lives – learning linked to their daily-lived experiences and realities or training that contributes to their knowledge and skills. There is therefore a need for awareness programmes to change people's mindset about ALE – an orientation that shows that ALE is much broader, transdisciplinary and multi-sectoral. Such an orientation is also in line with UNESCO's 2015 Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (UNESCO, 2016) which advocates for ALE to include literacy, skills and training, and citizenship. In this regard, learning to read and write is only the starting point - foundational to skills acquisition and citizenship initiatives where members of the

community would be responsible for various developments by participating and holding their governing authorities accountable.

In 2020, Malawi enacted its first ever National Adult Literacy and Education Policy with the aim of providing a comprehensive guiding framework in planning and implementation of ALE programmes and activities. The policy outlines that the priority areas for ALE are coordination and collaboration among stakeholders; access, relevance and quality of ALE services; visibility and awareness of ALE programmes; and resource mobilisation for funding of ALE activities. These were developed against a background of challenges that the ALE sector faces in the country. In operationalising the policy for its effective implementation, the Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare developed a strategic plan for the period 2022 to 2027. This strategic plan aims at providing direction for the implementation of the priority areas specified in the National Adult Literacy and Education Policy. The development of the policy and strategy had consultations from various stakeholders of ALE. It is therefore

believed that, in the process the stakeholders would know what is expected of them and act accordingly in promoting ALE programmes and services in contributing to sustainable development of the country.

The Catholic University of Malawi (CUNIMA) and adult education in Malawi

One of the stakeholders in the ALE sector is CUNIMA, a private university which was established in 2005. In recognising the important role of adult education in the economy and society, CUNIMA introduced a Diploma in Adult Education and Development in 2021 and developed a research agenda in adult education and development as its contribution to the operationalisation of the National Adult Literacy and Education Policy.



CUNIMA students in a focus group discussion with community members of Masikini village

Diploma in Adult Education and Development

CUNIMA views adult education and development (AED) as an interdisciplinary field of study and practice, and therefore its approach to AED is multi-disciplinary, intersectional and multisectoral. CUNIMA recognises adult education as comprising multiple established academic domains including community education; technical and vocational education and training (TVET); adult basic education (that subsumes literacy); worker education and studies in higher education. In this regard, the diploma programme in Adult Education and Development (DAE) has several core courses from Adult Education, Political Economy, Sociology, Development Studies, Political Science to Psychology. Whilst located in the Faculty of Social Sciences, the conceptualisation and design of the programme was done collaboratively with staff from the Faculty of Education and the courses are taught by staff members from both faculties. The DAE programme has two cohorts that comprise students working with various institutions, for example, the government and civil society organisations. It is believed that this programme could assist in building capacity for longer term planning and implementation of ALE activities. CUNIMA plans to build on this work which potentially

lays the foundation for community-based research and post-graduate studies in a transdisciplinary adult education programme.

Programme encourages ALE students in community engagement

Of great importance in the development of the Adult Education programme is the introduction of a research element. The programme encourages students to participate in research and community engagement activities, including interaction with communities and their members. This design feature is significant in a context where communities face a range of socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment and the need for community development. The interface between CUNIMA and its adjacent communities encourages the urgency to bring into existence adult education programmes that are more responsive to the needs and interests of these communities. In October 2022, students were involved in a community mapping exercise of villages surrounding CUNIMA. Using transect walks, the exercise provided insight about community needs and the kinds of issues that community education programmes could respond to.

The programme seems to have had a positive impact on students. In a recent evaluation, one student described how the courses have contributed to advancing his knowledge and skills related to community engagement and community work. Another student expressed her excitement about how the programme is enhancing her skills in community organising and its direct impact on the nature of her work as an activist.

Poverty, unemployment, and gender inequality mean ALE needs to be community responsive

CUNIMA's interest in adult education is driven by a range of socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, gender inequality and the need to respond to community development. Rigorous research that brings into existence an adult education system that is responsive to the needs and interests of communities is of the utmost importance. It is for this reason that through its mission of contributing to the integral development of the nation, CUNIMA is embarking on building a comprehensive approach



Students enrolled in the diploma programme at CUNIMA

to research in the multidisciplinary field of adult education. At present, there is little systemic and analytical research in adult education and related fields. Research in this field is often fragmented or linked to adjacent fields such as community development. Furthermore, research in adult education has little or limited orientation to the wider social-political economy in which issues of the labour market, education and training possibilities are considered.

Research that is responsive to community needs

CUNIMA's approach, therefore, is based on the concept of research that requires and contributes to a comprehensive response to the challenge posed by education and training in the context of national, regional and global developments. The effect of this approach will be to provide insights for longer term

policy and practice and for a set of strategies commensurate to such policies. Our approach also highlights the interconnectedness between these policies and a wider remit of state policies (in other domains of the state) and institutional interventions to build an enduring platform both for the genuine transformation of the present system and for its sustainability. At present, CUNIMA is pursuing financial support to implement its research agenda using a variety of ways in mobilising the necessary resources. CUNIMA has the capability and mechanisms to accommodate the establishment of the research portfolio as a transdisciplinary focus that cuts across its faculties. Like with the establishment of its Diploma in Adult Education, CUNIMA encourages faculty collaboration in the establishment of the research focus. CUNIMA will further build support through its growing networks of relationships and explore possibilities through local, regional and international organisations and institutions that have direct interests in advancing adult education systems.

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