

Merging lifelong learning and human rights for a new social contract



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Lifelong learning is a continuous process that accompanies individuals throughout all stages of life, with each stage having its own needs and circumstances. This means that rights issues are diverse and will change according to the different stages and contexts. Lifelong learning and human rights must work in tandem to effect positive change. To achieve this, advocating for a new social contract for education, development, and human rights is essential.

Setting the terminological ground

The lifelong learning approach is an educational concept that emphasises the importance of continuous learning throughout an individual's life. This approach sees learning not as confined to traditional educational institutions, but achievable through a variety of means and opportunities. It aims to enhance the personal, social and professional development of individuals throughout their lives.

Human rights are a set of freedoms and rights that all individuals should enjoy without discrimination. These include the right to life, liberty, security of person, freedom from torture and slavery, protection from discrimination, and the right to freedom of expression and participation in social, economic and cultural life.

Integrating human rights into the lifelong learning approach

A human rights-based approach to lifelong learning can be transformative, not only in achieving sustainable development and enhancing human dignity, but also as a key entry point for building a transformative awareness of the need to uphold rights, including the right to education.

Lifelong learning can serve to promote and protect human rights, while a human-rights based approach can enhance lifelong learning. Moreover, learning about human rights means that individuals are not just aware of their rights but also understand them. This understanding enables them to defend their rights and participate in promoting and protecting human rights in their communities.

Empowering individuals with educational opportunities and skills development throughout their lives means that they can reach their full potential and contribute effectively to their communities. This integration promotes equality and social justice, ultimately improving the quality of life for all.

Lifelong learning follows a continuous and interconnected cycle that spans various stages of life, with adult education being the most extended phase. This cycle

encompasses diverse learning needs and goals at different life stages, ensuring individuals have ongoing opportunities for personal and professional growth. It is often linked to the demands of the labour market. This narrow link, however, contributes to marginalising the humanistic aspect of learning by focusing on career advancement and gaining an edge in the labour market. However, an essential aim of lifelong learning should be to promote self-enhancement in terms of knowledge, intellect, and spirituality (learning for oneself). Furthermore, it is crucial to elevate the concept of adult learning and education (ALE) to address contemporary challenges and rapid changes in various fields of society.

Therefore, practising human rights involves applying these rights. Individuals, governments, social institutions, and societies must respect, promote, and implement human rights. If human rights are not practised and respected, they remain mere promises on paper. This awareness and understanding of the connection between lifelong learning and human rights can be described as a new social contract. Thus, it is crucial to unify efforts and collaborate across countries and regions to expand the right to education to encompass lifelong learning. This approach can serve as one of the pillars of the desired social contract.

A new social contract

This aligns with the UNESCO report *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*, which states that “adult learning and education must look very different a generation from now. As our economies and societies change, adult education will need to extend far beyond lifelong learning for labour market purposes. Opportunities for career change and reskilling need to connect to a broader reform of all education systems that emphasizes the creation of multiple flexible pathways.”

All of this requires motivating individuals to continue learning and improving their reality to meet contemporary demands, both on a personal level and within local communities. Achieving this requires that internationally recognised ALE institutions adopt a set of strategies and practises, such as:

- **Promoting and advocating for the right to lifelong learning and adult education:** this will significantly contribute to engaging diverse groups in learning processes.
- **Including adult education as part of the new social contract:** to inspire and encourage individuals to set short and long term goals for their personal development, motivating them to engage in continuous learning.

- **Providing diverse learning opportunities:** multiple and varied learning opportunities should be available, including educational courses, workshops, and online resources. These should reflect contemporary developments and needs, whilst also ensuring inclusion, especially for marginalised groups.
- **Giving encouragement and support:** link ALE programmes to community mobilisation, especially in marginalised communities, to support and galvanise participation.
- **Improve understanding of the need for learning:** individuals should recognise that learning is not merely a means to career advancement, but also a necessity for personal development and a fulfilling life.
- **Improving self-motivation:** individuals should learn how to develop self-motivation skills and positive thinking for lifelong learning.
- **Encouraging critical thinking:** individuals should be encouraged to think critically and seek answers based on their understanding.
- **Promoting continuous learning as a means of adaptability:** individuals should be encouraged to learn how to deal with change in order to equip them to meet new challenges.

Challenges on the way

Efforts to build a new social contract for education face many challenges and obstacles. These include:

- **Interests:** Nations, institutions and even individuals operate based on interests that drive their actions. In times of crisis – usually escalating into conflict – violence is often resorted to as a solution, leading to bloody wars. Many institutions that are supposed to help resolve conflicts have failed to spare humanity from war and lead it to peace.
- **North–South Divide:** The relationship between the Global North and South remains a major challenge. This raises the question: Is it possible to establish a new social contract for education and learning between the North and South? Or even among nations of the Global South, given that it is often difficult to build a social contract within the same region or even within a country.

- **Artificial Intelligence:** AI will undoubtedly pose one of the most significant challenges for humanity in the near future, particularly in reshaping access to education and redefining human rights. Its rapid development, driven by profit-driven corporations rather than educational institutions, raises concerns about digital literacy, data privacy, and ethical decision-making. AI has the potential to either bridge or widen the gap in lifelong learning opportunities, making equitable access to technology a critical human rights issue. The divisions of the future will not be based on national borders, but rather within societies themselves, between those who have access to knowledge and technological resources and those who do not. This divide will become a global phenomenon, splitting humanity into a dominant elite and a powerless majority.

These and more challenges will present significant obstacles to establishing a new social contract for education and learning. There is an urgent need for a roadmap to pave the way for advocating for a new social contract for education.

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