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Development of Adult Education Systems in Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria and Pakistan

Abstract: This paper examines the existence and development of adult education (AE) systems in three developing countries: Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria and Pakistan. Conceptually, it draws on research on adult learning systems (ALSs), which assesses the extent to which governance, provision and financing of AE have evolved in each country. Empirically, the study involves a comparative analysis of the three countries, analysing similarities and differences between their AE policies, key actors shaping AE systems, available AE and the main challenges involved in establishing AE systems. The findings indicate that AE systems in the countries under review remain highly unsystematic and fragmented, characterised by low levels of adult participation in AE provision. Nonetheless, the analysis also reveals that progress has been made over the past 15 years, particularly through the adoption of policies, programmes and forms of provision providing organised AE opportunities.

Keywords: adult education systems, adult learning systems, Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, Pakistan

Razvoj sistema obrazovanja odraslih u Kirgistanu, Nigeriji i Pakistanu

Apstrakt: U ovom radu se ispituju postojanje i razvoj sistema obrazovanja odraslih u tri zemlje u razvoju: Kirgistanu, Nigeriji i Pakistanu. Rad se na konceptualnom nivou oslanja na istraživanja sistema učenja odraslih u kojima se procenjuje u kojoj su meri upravljanje, obezbeđivanje i finansiranje programa obrazovanja odraslih razvijeni u svakoj od ovih

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zemalja. Na empirijskom nivou je sprovedena uporedna analiza tri zemlje, pri čemu se razmatraju sličnosti i razlike među njihovim politikama obrazovanja odraslih, ključnim akterima koji oblikuju ove sisteme, dostupnim ponudama obrazovanja odraslih i glavnim izazovima u uspostavljanju sistema obrazovanja odraslih. Nalazi ukazuju na to da su sistemi obrazovanja odraslih u posmatranim zemljama i dalje u velikoj meri neujednačeni i fragmentisani, te da ih odlikuje nizak nivo učešća odraslih u programima obrazovanja odraslih. Ipak, analiza takođe pokazuje da je tokom poslednjih 15 godina ostvaren napredak, naročito putem usvajanja politika, programa i oblika obrazovanja koji obezbeđuju organizovane mogućnosti za obrazovanje odraslih.

Ključne reči: sistemi obrazovanja odraslih, sistemi učenja odraslih, Kirgistan, Nigerija, Pakistan

Introduction

In his book *Political Economy of Adult Learning Systems,* Richard Desjardins (2017) states that adult learning systems (ALSs) consist of various organised learning opportunities (both formal and non-formal) available to adults, together with the associated structures and social partners that shape the organisation and governance of adult education (AE). Over the last 30 years, organised forms of AE have increased, although this trend is more pronounced in some countries than in others. Countries that have developed advanced ALSs view AE as a tool for managing economic and social development. Desjardins identifies modernisation and globalisation processes, the rise of the knowledge economy and neoliberalism as the principal forces shaping the evolution of ALSs since World War Two.

However, the existence of AE structures underpinning ALS is by no means self-evident. The ALSs are characterised by the fact that they are unsystematic (Kalenda, 2024) and located at the intersection of multiple national systems: (a) the education and training system, which provides, inter alia, second-chance education, adult higher education and adult vocational education; (b) the labour market and employment system, which provides opportunities for personnel training and human resource development (i.e. non-formal vocational education and training (VET)) for job-related reasons by employers and trade unions, as well as active labour market programmes by the state; (c) welfare state and other social policies including, inter alia, various social benefits for socially disadvantaged groups in general and immigrant integration programmes in particular (Desjardins, 2017; Desjardins & Kalenda, 2025).

Furthermore, the coordination of ALSs between the state, the market and civil society is supported by different regimes, which means that successful coordination between the state and social partners is crucial for successful ALS

governance. Such coordination may occur at the political level (e.g. alignment of agendas among stakeholders) or at the operational level (e.g. coordination of implementation and management). Overall, the level of ALS development reflects the extent to which governance, provision and financing of AE have progressed in each country (Desjardins, 2017; Desjardins & Ioannidou, 2020).

While ALSs in developed countries have been extensively researched (e.g. Desjardins, 2017; Desjardins & Kalenda, 2025; Kalenda, 2024; Schemmann et al., 2020), less is known about the existence, development and coordination of AE systems in developing countries. This paper seeks to deepen understanding of AE systems in three developing countries – Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria and Pakistan – with different histories, welfare regimes and governance structures. To this end, the paper addresses the following research question: How are AE systems being shaped in Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria and Pakistan?

The paper is structured as follows. It first presents the conceptual framework and outlines the methodological approach. It then provides an analysis of AE systems in Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria and Pakistan in accordance with the objectives of the study. The final section discusses the identified similarities and differences and presents the main findings.

Conceptual Framework

As ALS lies at the intersection of various national systems (education, labour market, social welfare), successful coordination between the state (government and ministries) and social partners is key for effective ALS coordination (Desjardins, 2017; cf. UNESCO, 2022) as well as for increased adult participation in lifelong learning (LLL) activities.

Building on Esping-Andersen's typology of welfare state regimes and Hall and Soskice's typology of varieties of capitalism and drawing on analyses of AE structures and their perceived economic and social outcomes across country case studies, Desjardins (2017) develops a typology of ALSs in some of the most advanced economies (cf. Desjardins & Ioannidou, 2020). According to this framework, coordination within ALSs among the state, the market and civil society is supported by three predominant regimes: the market-, state– and stakeholder-led regimes. However, some countries cannot be categorised under a single dominant model (e.g. Austria, Finland and the Netherlands) or any of them due to their unique historical development (e.g. Asian countries) (Desjardins, 2017). (1) The *market-led regime* operates according to the rules of market competition and is strongly influenced by neoliberal ideology, which favours those who

are economically privileged, thereby increasing economic inequalities. Countries that typically fall under this regime include Australia, Canada, the United States, New Zealand, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Japan and Switzerland. (2) In the *state-led regime*, the state plays a key role in managing economic, social and cultural policies and can direct both the supply of and demand for skills towards the achievement of centrally defined goals. Countries that fall under this regime include the small Asian "tiger" economies (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea) and China. (3) In the *stakeholders-led regime*, interest groups co-operate beyond market mechanisms to achieve better results (corporatism). The focus is on the coordination of social and industrial relations, with non-market coordination primarily complementing the prevailing market-based coordination. Countries that fall under this regime include Italy, Japan, France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. Nevertheless, some countries support a high level of market activity, complemented by agreements between stakeholders and a stronger role of the state in the coordination of society, especially in the distribution of social spending, which allows for a higher level of social security. In this context, Desjardins identifies the (4) *state-led regime with a high degree of stakeholder involvement*, characterised by low levels of income inequality and significant investment in education throughout life. Countries that fall under this regime include Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland (Desjardins, 2017, pp. 26–30).

To facilitate cross-national comparison of ALSs, Desjardins (2017) classifies the major forms of structured AE provision into four categories. (I) *Adult Basic Education* (ABE) and *Adult General Education (*AGE), including basic skills provision, comprise forms of education leading to basic education (ISCED levels 1 and 2) and general secondary education (ISCED level 3). In high-income countries, these forms are typically regarded as formal AE, whereas in most low– and middle-income countries, basic skills programmes are generally considered non-formal AE. (II) *Adult Higher Education* (AHE) is typically classified as formal AE and may be either integrated within, or separate from, the regular higher education system. It is often linked to continuing education for professionals (ISCED 5a), with many programmes also having a vocational orientation and being delivered by vocational colleges or polytechnics (ISCED levels 5a and 5b). (III*) Adult Vocational Education* (AVE) (including continuing education, technical education and workplace learning) encompasses a wide range of formal (ISCED levels 3b, 3c, 4, 5b and 5c) and non-formal programmes, depending on the national context. In some cases, non-formal provision can lead to formal recognition. (IV) *Adult Liberal Education* (ALiE), including popular education, typically covers provision related to sports, hobbies and other leisure-oriented

activities. Although generally non-formal, such provision may be linked to basic skills training and, in certain contexts, may also lead to formal recognition (Desjardins, 2017, pp. 19–20).

In addition to the structural elements underpinning ALSs, Schemmann with associates (2020) emphasise the role of organisations as key actors shaping ALSs. Drawing on a multi-level understanding of AE and the multi-level governance model of AE developed by Schrader (2010), the authors identify a range of actors operating across five interconnected levels. At the micro level, the focus is on the teaching–learning process, with teachers and learners serving as the principal actors. The second level, situated at the meso level, involves adult education organisations acting as collective entities. The third level, also at the meso level, encompasses the immediate institutional environment of AE organisations, including chambers, provider associations, accreditation agencies, statistical offices and research institutes. At the macro level, state actors – such as central governments, federal states and municipalities – play a central role through regulation of adult education and the allocation of financial resources. Finally, the mega level comprises international actors, including the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Bank, which provide policies and financial resources for funding projects and programmes.

Finally, countries with a high level of adult participation in LLL and a well-distributed level of AE have developed the most effective ALSs. Several key features of effective ALSs have been identified by Desjardins (2017; Desjardins & Ioannidou, 2020). The first key factor is the level of resources allocated to adult education. In this regard, the state plays a crucial role by shaping public policies and engaging social partners to support the development of opportunities and the provision of AE (e.g. the Nordic countries, which have the highest LLL participation rates, also allocate the most resources to ALS). The second factor is the comprehensive understanding of AE (i.e. the integration of different formal and non-formal education programmes at vocational, upper-secondary and higher education levels) and the distribution of responsibilities among various stakeholders (e.g., countries with high LLL participation typically demonstrate strong involvement of social partners in AE governance and policy formulation). The third factor concerns the active development of AE policies, including analysing the conditions, needs, interests and mutual understanding among the relevant actors. Outreach and targeting are crucial in this respect, especially for adults with low or no qualifications. AE provision must be flexible, supportive of all forms of learning and education and based on the recognition of prior learning

(RPL). The fourth factor is an effective labour market policy that can be linked to organised AE and is designed to promote employment (e.g. by offering publicly supported training programmes or formal employability programmes with public support for the unemployed). Finally, effective ALSs include flexible and diverse forms of AE (e.g. addressing the needs of adult learners) that can also be linked to the formal education system, which is primarily designed for young people. However, the creation of parallel education pathways exclusively for adults, while meeting labour market demands, can also lead to lower-status qualifications and contribute to stigmatisation (Desjardins, 2017, pp. 246–252; Desjardins & Ioannidou, 2020, pp. 158–162).

Methodology

For a comparative empirical analysis of AE systems, we selected Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria and Pakistan: two Asian countries (one in central and one in south Asia) and one African country. All three are developing countries in the Global South and member states of UNESCO, the World Bank and the International Labour Organization (ILO). These countries have different histories, welfare regimes and governance structures. Overall, AE is less regulated and receives less attention than other parts of the education system (e.g., K-12 or higher education) in all three countries. The responsibilities for AE legal regulation, the public recognition of its providers and their basic funding in Kyrgyzstan rest within the state, whereas, in Nigeria and Pakistan, it is shared between the central government and the states (Nigeria) or local governments (provinces in Pakistan). It is difficult to assign the countries under study to a single dominant governance model by applying Desjardins' (2017) typology of coordination among the state, the market and civil society within ALSs. Nevertheless, Kyrgyzstan and Nigeria most closely resemble a stakeholder-led regime, reflecting the prominent role of non-government organisations (NGOs) and donor agencies in AE (albeit with stronger corporate involvement in Nygeria) and the weak implementation capacity of state policy and funding, while Pakistan aligns more closely with a state-led regime with high stakeholder involvement, characterised by a division of roles whereby the state sets AE policy frameworks while NGOs and donor organisations play a central role in implementation.

The comparative analysis involved juxtaposing the three country cases following Egetenmeyer's (2020) proposed steps of descriptive and analytical juxtaposition – namely data collection, identification of common features and analytical interpretation. To guide the comparison, four analytical categories were developed:

(a) policies (educational, labour market and social); (b) actors shaping adult education (AE) systems at the mega, macro and meso levels; (c) available provision, including ABE, AGE, AHE, AVE and ALiE; and (d) key challenges related to the establishment AE systems. The analysis focuses primarily on contemporary developments in AE systems over the past 15 years, while also acknowledging important historical initiatives in adult education predating the turn of the millennium. With regard to source selection, the study draws on official national AE policy documents, official data and country reports produced by governments and international organisations, as well as peer-reviewed scientific and professional journal articles on adult education in the three countries. This multi-source approach was adopted to enhance the reliability and objectivity of the comparisons made.

Kyrgyzstan

With a population of over 7 million, Kyrgyzstan is a low– to middle-income developing country located in Central Asia. Its economy relies primarily on agriculture, labour remittances (which accounted for approximately 32% of the GDP in 2022) and the extractive industry. In 2023, 30% of the population was classified as poor and without labour remittances. Governance remains largely centralised, although efforts toward decentralisation have been underway since the early 2000s (Asian Development Bank, 2015). After it gained independence in 1991, the country experienced a sharp decline in Soviet-era educational institutions as public funding collapsed and vocational education and training (VET) systems deteriorated. A series of reforms have been introduced since 2010 to rebuild AE, including the adoption of the National Education Development Strategy in 2013 and the 2019 Law on Education, which underpins the Education System Development Programme for 2021–2040. During this period, AE has focused on workforce development, digital literacy and rural inclusion, with substantial support from international partners such as the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and DVV International.

Policies

Kyrgyzstan has taken steps to strengthen AE with its education policy measures, but major challenges remain. The National Qualification System Concept 2019, developed jointly by the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) and the Ministry of Labour and Social Development (MoLSD), aims to establish national

and sectoral qualification frameworks, recognition standards and assessment systems by 2025. However, the lack of a functioning RPL system and a weak legal framework continue to constrain the development of AE. The National Education Development Strategy 2021–2040 emphasises LLL as a fundamental principle that extends beyond formal schooling to encompass adults through continuous skill development, as well as the professionalisation of adult educators; there is, however, a lack of institutional mechanisms to implement this goal. DVV International has been addressing these gaps in collaboration with national partners by supporting non-formal education, especially in rural areas. The key initiatives include Curriculum GlobALE and the EU-funded CHANCE project, which has been offering VET to people in prison (DVV International: Central Asia, 2019). The National Education Development Strategy also underlines the importance of non-formal education in providing marginalised groups with skills relevant to the labour market. The Strategy classifies AE within formal and non-formal education, but it does not explicitly recognise AE as a distinct pillar tailored to the needs of non-traditional learners.

Kyrgyzstan has implemented labour market policies aimed at improving access to VET and promoting employment through AE programmes. VET institutions in Kyrgyzstan are closely aligned with the labour market policy under the National Employment Policy 2020 and offer VET for the unemployed, continuing education for adults, retraining programmes for skilled workers, intermediate-level training through secondary VET and basic training through primary VET (European Training Foundation, 2021). In addition, AE centres contribute to labour market policy objectives through participation in migration-oriented programmes. These centres support local job creation to reduce economic migration by offering training in income generation, agriculture and crafts in rural areas. For those preparing for migration, mainly to Russia, the centres also offer preparatory courses in the Russian language, civil rights and relevant legislation. An important social policy measure – the National Concept for Social Protection of the Population of the Kyrgyz Republic 2021–2040 – emphasises rural development and inclusion. DVV International has worked with local governments and institutions to help transform public libraries in rural areas into community learning centres. These centres address the learning needs of underserved populations, while promoting community engagement (DVV International: Central Asia, 2021). In addition, the Institute for the Third Age, established in 2022, provides AE opportunities for older adults, including courses in reading, computer literacy and traditional crafts. This initiative aligns with broader social policy objectives related to active ageing, intergenerational learning and the reduction of social isolation among older people.

Actors

At the mega level, international organisations, including UNESCO, DVV International, GIZ, the EU, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, set the strategic direction and support policy development in AE (European Training Foundation, 2021). DVV International, active in Kyrgyzstan since 2002, has been strengthening professional training and promoting inclusive programmes through partnerships with local actors. The national government agencies play a central role at the macro level. The MoES is responsible for secondary, vocational and non-formal education. Supporting institutions, such as the Agency for Basic Vocational Education and the Kyrgyz Academy of Education, contribute to curriculum development and teacher training. The MoLSD is responsible for job placement and retraining of adults and manages digital platforms such as Tunduk and Zanyatost.kg, which provide training resources and labour market information. Several institutions run AE programmes at the meso level. Universities offer in-service, modular and short-cycle professional development courses aimed at reskilling and upskilling adults. VET colleges and lycées under the MoES and private vocational centres offer basic and secondary vocational education, as well as continuing education and retraining programmes for adults (European Training Foundation, 2021). These providers often work with the Public Employment Services (PES), coordinated by the MoLSD, to provide short-term vocational training for unemployed adults[6]. In addition, more than 1,000 adult education centres, primarily funded by NGOs or learners, offer a variety of training opportunities. Public libraries and regional learning centres have been providing non-formal education in crafts, digital literacy and life skills since 2022, with targeted initiatives for older adults (DVV International: Central Asia, 2021). NGOs and associations, such as the Kyrgyz Adult Education Association (KAEA), focus on supporting vulnerable populations and frequently partner with municipalities to implement local training initiatives.

Provision

AE programmes are designed to support LLL and are mainly offered outside the formal education system. These programmes include: (a) ABE programmes that take place outside the formal education system and offer adult literacy skills under the national programme "Education for All"; (b) AHE programmes that include study programmes offered by higher education institutions, often aimed

[6] See: https://zanyatost.kg/Page/PageShow/1016.

at mature students who wish to complete or continue their higher education through part-time learning and short-term professional programmes; (c) AVE programmes that are provided by a combination of state institutions – including VET colleges and lyceums run by the MoES (which offer primary, secondary and retraining programmes) and public employment services (which offer short-term training for unemployed adults) – and private VET providers, such as vocational centres offering training in IT, accounting and trades; (d) ALiE institutions, such as music and art schools and other learning centres that offer specialised liberal education; (e) individual teaching activities where learning is tailored to the individuals' personal needs and supports their professional development and personal growth.

Challenges

Despite the above initiatives, significant structural challenges have been undermining AE in Kyrgyzstan. Government funding primarily favours the formal education sector, leaving non-formal AE dependent on external donors (DVV International: Central Asia, 2021). The lack of a functioning RPL system, combined with fragmented governance and limited outreach to low-skilled adults, limits access and inclusion. These problems are exacerbated by socio-economic inequalities, especially between urban and rural areas. Kyrgyzstan ranks 117th on the United Nations Human Capital Index, indicating persistent educational inequalities. OECD data show that literacy, numeracy and digital problem-solving skills are low among adults, with around 60% at or below the lowest proficiency levels (OECD, 2019). These deficits have been impeding economic transformation, especially as Kyrgyzstan seeks to develop its digital and green economy. Without comprehensive policy reforms and greater investment, the country risks entrenching existing social divides and undermining its human capital development (Asian Development Bank, 2015).

Nigeria

Nigeria's population was estimated at 234.6 million in 2025. The country's economy and system of governance have undergone significant changes since 1980, shaped by periods of military rule, democratic transition and economic reform. Nigeria remains a developing country with an economy that is heavily dependent on oil exports. Despite ongoing efforts toward economic diversification and

structural reform, persistent challenges, including weak institutions, inflation, unemployment, widespread poverty and poor infrastructure, continue to undermine sustainable development, as well as the education system and AE.

AE policy initiatives in Nigeria have been developed since the 1980s with the aim of improving literacy rates and expanding access to education. The National Mass Literacy Campaign, launched in 1982, sought to address widespread adult illiteracy by promoting functional literacy and numeracy skills as a means of enhancing productivity and supporting national development. This initiative responded to an urgent need for adult education, as policy intervention was essential to mainstream AE in line with UNESCO's *Education for All* objectives (Kazeem & Oduaran, 2006). Nigeria's education landscape has witnessed both progress and persistent challenges over the past 15 years. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, introduced in the early 2000s, has continued to shape education policy, aiming to provide free and compulsory education for all children, while also incorporating elements of adult literacy provision. However, as Ayantunji (2019) observes, the strong emphasis on primary education has often overshadowed adult literacy initiatives. As a result, concerns have been raised regarding the adequacy and relevance of AE provision, particularly given that Nigeria continues to record one of the highest adult illiteracy rates globally, with approximately 37% of adults unable to read or write.

Policies

The National Policy on Education, introduced in 1977 and revised several times, provides the framework for formal and non-formal education in Nigeria and emphasises AE as an essential tool for national development with the aim of improving the level of literacy, vocational skills and LLL opportunities for adults[7]. In addition, the National Literacy Policy 2006, formulated by the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education, aims to reduce adult illiteracy rates and improve access to LLL. It targets vulnerable groups, such as women, the rural population and the elderly, and focuses on basic literacy and numeracy skills.

The Nigerian government introduced the National Employment Policy 2001 to create an enabling environment for job creation, employment sustainability and skills development. The policy promotes a combination of formal education and technical/vocational skills, often provided through AE programmes.

[7] See: https://education.gov.ng/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/NATIONAL-POLICY-ON-EDUCATION.pdf.

The policy improves the employability of adults and encourages entrepreneurship by aligning AE with labour market demands. The National Skills Development Policy 2013 focuses on equipping the Nigerian workforce with skills relevant to both domestic and global labour markets. The policy emphasises adult education as a key mechanism for upskilling adults, particularly through technical and VET. It supports adult learners in acquiring market-relevant competencies aimed at improving productivity, employability and economic participation.

The National Social Protection Policy 2016 seeks to reduce poverty and inequality by providing social safety nets for vulnerable populations. By prioritising AE as a tool for poverty reduction and social inclusion, particularly through initiatives such as the National Poverty Eradication Programme, the policy promotes AE programmes aimed at empowering adults, especially in rural and underserved communities. In addition, the Nigerian government has acknowledged the role of adult education in advancing gender equality and social inclusion. Policies such as the National Gender Equality Policy 2006, along with initiatives led by institutions including the National Commission for Women, focus on expanding access to AE for women and marginalised groups in order to address gender disparities in education and employment.

Actors

At the mega level, international organisations such as UNESCO and the World Bank provide policy guidance and technical assistance (Inuwa et al., 2023). The Commonwealth, a voluntary association of 56 independent and equal countries, also contributes through scholarships and various forms of technical support. At the macro level, a range of ministries, agencies and state government authorities act as key stakeholders. These include the Federal Ministry of Education, which is responsible for the design, coordination and implementation of AE programmes; the Ministry of Information and National Orientation, which oversees programme design, mass campaigns and awareness-raising initiatives; the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Alleviation, which manages rehabilitation programmes and empowerment initiatives; the Ministry of Labour and Employment, which is charged with job creation and addressing skills gaps to promote sustainable employment; and the Ministry of Youth and Development, which seeks to create alternative pathways for young people to secure employment and achieve self-sustaining livelihoods. The State Agency for Mass Education is responsible for policy formulation, project design, implementation, service delivery, management and coordination, while the Department of Community and

Social Development oversees the coordination and implementation of AE programmes across learning centres in all clusters. At the meso level, courses for adults are provided by a diverse range of actors, including literacy centres, NGOs, community-based organisations, religious institutions, trade unions, corporate organisations (such as the MTN Foundation and the Dangote Group).

Provision

The ABE and AGE programmes in Nigeria include non-formal basic skills and remedial courses, such as reading, writing, basic computer skills and functional literacy. AHE provision includes university courses, including "traditional" (B.Ed, B.A.(Ed), M.Ed, PhD) and open distance learning programmes. In addition, Colleges of Education and Polytechnics are responsible for awarding the national Certificates in Education, National Diplomas and the Higher National Diplomas. AVE encompasses a broad range of public and private non-formal skills acquisition programmes (e.g. tailoring, carpentry, soap making), initiatives such as the N-Power programme for unemployed individuals (providing skills training) and informal apprenticeship programmes (e.g., tailoring and automobile mechanics), while the National Directorate of Employment offers mobile learning programmes aimed at equipping adults with employment skills. ALiE is coordinated by the National Orientation Agency and implemented through community-based awareness and education campaigns, which seek to promote civic responsibility, national values and social cohesion among adult citizens.

Challenges

The level of funding allocated to adult education is one of the major challenges facing the AE system in Nigeria. Inadequate financing, poor infrastructure and equipment and insufficient human resources continue to constrain effective provision (Oboqua & Aniekwu, 2022). In addition, limited coordination and engagement at both the federal and state levels have contributed to weak policy implementation, overlapping institutional responsibilities and low stakeholder involvement in AE. Consequently, consultative mechanisms remain underdeveloped and stakeholder participation in policy formulation limited, reflecting a lack of comprehensive understanding of AE in the country. Furthermore, the Nigerian labour market is characterised by high levels of unemployment and underemployment, particularly among young people and adults without formal

qualifications. Although AE programmes should improve workforce skills and increase employability, empirical studies point to a mismatch between the skills provided through AE initiatives and labour market demands (Okojie, 2021). For example, while many AE programmes continue to prioritise basic literacy and traditional vocational skills, the rapidly evolving technological landscape requires more advanced and specialised training.

Pakistan

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a developing country in South Asia. Its population was estimated at 241.5 million in 2023, while its GDP stood at USD 338.37 billion the same year. Although the country has historically been more centralised due to strong federal control and military influence, its system of governance combines centralised and decentralised structures, particularly following efforts toward decentralisation renewed in 2010. An estimated 22.8 million children aged between 5 and 16 do not attend school[8]. The adult literacy rate stood at 58% in 2019, indicating that approximately 42% of the adult population is illiterate, with pronounced gender disparities[9]. As a result, Pakistan continues to record one of the highest adult illiteracy rates globally. AE in Pakistan seeks to address the learning needs of adults through formal, non-formal and informal learning pathways, with a focus on improving literacy, vocational skills and overall capabilities (Noreen & Iqbal, 2025).

Policies

The 2017–2025 National Education Policy places strong emphasis on literacy, LLL and non-formal basic education as key means of expanding learning opportunities for adults. In particular, it prioritises literacy programmes for adults aged 16 to 25 with the aim of increasing national literacy rates. The policy also focuses on strengthening basic, functional and skills-based literacy provision and utilises religious education institutions (i.e. madrassas) and community centres as venues for adult literacy programmes. The policy promotes non-formal education as an alternative learning pathway for adults outside the formal school system, with the aim of improving literacy, supporting LLL and enhancing workforce

[8] See: https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1198109-role-of-ngos-and-international-organisations-in-enhancing-literacy-in-pakistan.

[9] See: https://www.statista.com/statistics/572781/literacy-rate-in-pakistan/.

development (Government of Pakistan, 2017). To improve opportunities for AE, literacy and non-formal basic education were also given top priority in Pakistan's 2009–2015 National Education Policy and its predecessors, e.g. the National Education Policy of 1998–2010 – through formalised adult literacy programmes and universal basic education initiatives. These policies have sought to widen access to LLL opportunities for all, in line with Pakistan's international commitments, including Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals (Government of Pakistan, 2009).

Pakistan has a comprehensive set of labour laws designed to protect the rights and welfare of workers. Legislation, such as the Workers Children (Education) Ordinance 1972, the Minimum Wages Ordinance 1961 and the Payment of Wages Act 1936, strengthens the welfare of workers by guaranteeing fair compensation and educational support for their children. In addition, the Apprenticeship Ordinance 1962 deals with vocational training and skill development. Finally, the Punjab Industrial Relations Act 2010 and the Industrial Relations Act 2012 regulate labour relations and dispute resolution procedures and aim to promote disciplined and law-abiding workplaces[10]. Furthermore, the Directorate of Workers' Education, operating under the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, provides computer classes and English language courses for workers and their children, thereby promoting LLL and skill development among workers. Finally, Pakistan's National Labour Policy 2010 places strong emphasis on improving the technical education and skill development of the workforce. It emphasises the value of education and training of workers through a variety of programmes (e.g. technical courses, apprenticeships and trainings in modern technologies) and seeks to improve the skills of both current and future workers by focusing on skills aligned with industry needs (Government of Pakistan, 2009, 2017).

As a conservative Muslim society, Pakistan lacks a specific social policy related to AE. However, its Constitution guarantees the rights of indigenous and marginalised communities to provide them with educational opportunities and preserve their identity and the country is on its way to introducing policies aimed at reducing (gender) inequalities and promoting social inclusion.

Actors

At the mega level, international organisations, such as UNESCO, the World Bank, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and the Canadian International

[10] See: https://www.usemultiplier.com/pakistan/employment-laws.

Development Agency (CIDA), contribute to education and skills development in Pakistan by providing funding and engaging in policy advocacy through partnerships at national and provincial levels. In addition, the EU and the Asian Development Bank offer loans and grants to support education sector reforms. At the macro level, the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, the National Vocational and Technical Training Commission and the National Commission for Human Development provide educational opportunities for adults[11]. At the meso level, organisations such as the National Commission for Human Development and the Citizens Foundation have established 170,190 adult literacy centres and 50 community learning centres across the country to impart basic literacy and numeracy skills[12]. Allama Iqbal Open University serves as a major provider of distance education to reach learners who lack access to conventional schooling, offering vocational and continuing education programmes, as well as undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. This provision is further complemented by private professional organisations and corporate training initiatives aimed at workforce development (such as those offered by PTCL, Engro and Nestlé), as well as fee-based online learning platforms (e.g. DigiSkills, Coursera).

Provision

ABE and AGE offer basic literacy, numeracy and language courses for adults between 15 and 45 years of age, a lower secondary school programme for girls with particular focus on gender equality, educational technology and life skills, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as courses leading to upper-secondary school qualifications. Under the AHE, Allama Iqbal Open University offers Bachelor's degrees in more than fifty disciplines, a wide range of master's and doctoral degrees through part-time and distance learning modes, as well as general certificate courses and postgraduate diplomas in more than twenty programme areas. The Virtual University of Pakistan also delivers higher education nationwide through online platforms and satellite television. AVE in Pakistan offers a range of programmes, including one– or two-year secondary level skills certificates and diplomas, informal industry-based apprenticeship schemes and programmes linked to secondary and post-secondary levels. Within the country's broader skills development strategy, digital literacy and entrepreneurship education are key priorities, supported by government initiatives such as DigiSkills.pk, which offers free online courses. Finally, the Seeta Majeed School of Liberal

[11] See: https://ophrd.gov.pk/Detail/OTUwNzhiNTktMDBiYS00M2E5LTg5MWYtOGUwZjUyMWI0OTc3.
[12] See: https://nchd.org.pk/Detail/ZjBmMWJhNzUtYjU1YS00YzMwLWJmYTUtYzg5ZWIxZjk0MGE3.

Arts and Social Sciences, which prepares students to engage with contemporary cultural, economic, political and institutional issues, offers ALiE through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the liberal arts and social sciences[13].

Challenges

Pakistan's education sector lacks efficiency. The quality of higher education and AE depends on several factors, including infrastructure, teaching staff, research capacity, as well as monitoring, evaluation and curricula (Ahsan, 2019). Pakistan's AE system is, in particular, constrained by lack of funds, underutilisation of resources, unstable policies and a centralised structure that often neglects the actual needs of the local population (Sain & Babiera II, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires targeted policy interventions aimed at poverty reduction through stronger alignment with labour market demands and increased investment in social sector development to expand educational opportunities (Nasir, 2001), as about 10% of urban Pakistani women from low-income populations are employed, compared to about one-third of their rural counterparts.

Comparison and Interpretation

This paper examined AE systems situated at the intersection of multiple national systems and characterised by a high degree of fragmentation in three selected developing countries. Based on the analysis, several key findings can be identified.

In all three countries, AE does not constitute a policy priority for governments and remains significantly underfunded compared to education for children and young people. Consequently, and in contrast to industrialised countries (Desjardins, 2017; Desjardins & Kalenda, 2025; Kalenda, 2024), AE systems in the countries studied play a limited role in steering economic and social development. Instead, they remain highly unsystematic and fragmented and are characterised by low levels of adult participation in AE provision, despite substantial population-level demand for education and for literacy, vocational and civic skills development.

Nevertheless, the analysis also indicates that progress has been made in all three countries over the past 15 years. This progress is reflected in the adoption of policies, programmes and forms of provision that have expanded organised AE opportunities for adults.

[13] See: www.bnu.edu.pk/slass.

Among the education, labour market and social policies shaping ALSs (Desjardins, 2017; Desjardins & Kalenda, 2025), education policy is the dominant policy forming the AE system in all three countries, providing adults with access to AE opportunities and to some extent aligning AE with social and economic development (e.g. labour force skills development, reducing illiteracy among the adult population). Labour market policies also play an important role in shaping AE in all three countries; they seek to reduce adult unemployment rates, develop workforce skills and promote employability through AE programmes. Social policies constitute a more limited but still relevant influence on AE systems in the analysed countries. In developing-country contexts, welfare state measures tend to be targeted rather than universal and are generally more limited and fragmented than those found in advanced economies (ILO, 2021). Nevertheless, social benefits aimed at socially disadvantaged groups are evident in both Kyrgyzstan and Nigeria. In Kyrgyzstan, such measures primarily target migrants, rural populations and the elderly, while, in Nigeria, they focus on rural populations and women, with the aim of reducing gender inequality.

Given that a wide range of organisations play a key role in shaping ALSs (Schemmann et al., 2020), this study examined the relevant actors in all three countries, who are active at different levels (Schrader, 2010). At the mega level, several international organisations support AE development through a range of instruments – including discursive dissemination, standard-setting, funding, coordination and technical assistance (Jakobi, 2009) – with particular focus on literacy, VET and LLL. Across all three countries, UNESCO has been promoting LLL and adult literacy through the Education for All initiative, while the World Bank has provided funding for projects related to VET reform and skills development. Other international and donor organisations also play prominent roles: for example, DVV International actively supports adult education in Kyrgyzstan, the Commonwealth undertakes similar activities in Nigeria and various bilateral and multilateral development agencies are involved in AE provision in Pakistan. This pattern highlights a strong reliance on donor funding for adult education across all three countries, while public funding by national governments remains limited (cf. UNESCO, 2022). At the macro level, government ministries, national agencies and subnational authorities in all three countries are responsible for setting policies and regulations for AE and hold decision-making power over the (non-) allocation of public financial resources. At the meso level, AE provision is delivered by a diverse set of actors, including NGOs, community-based organisations, adult literacy centres, universities and various VET institutions, all of which provide courses that promote literacy, skills development and LLL.

In Nigeria and Pakistan, however, the religious and socio-cultural contexts give religious institutions a particularly visible role as AE providers. Corporate organisations in both countries also play a visible role as providers of AE.

Among the forms of structured AE provision worldwide identified by Desjardins (2017), all four categories – ABE and AGE, AHE, AVE and ALiE – are present in all three countries, albeit to varying degrees. Of these four, ALiE is least developed in all three countries, reflecting a broader global trend (cf. UNESCO, 2022). In Nigeria and Pakistan, high adult illiteracy rates have led to a strong emphasis on ABE – primarily basic literacy programmes classified as non-formal AE – and on VET initiatives aimed at workforce development, which are frequently supported by projects and programmes funded by international and donor organisations. In contrast, the focus in Kyrgyzstan is primarily on VET to address unemployment and labour market needs, as well as labour migration to Russia. AHE programmes integrated into regular higher education are available in all three countries; however, their uptake among adults remains limited due to high costs and inflexible institutional structures.

While Desjardins and others (2017; Desjardins & Ioannidou, 2020; Desjardins & Kalenda, 2025) argue that effective ALSs require stable funding, a comprehensive understanding of AE, coordinated policies with active stakeholder participation, labour market policies linked to organised AE and flexible and diverse forms of AE, the analysis indicates that all three countries face major challenges in achieving these goals. First, AE is significantly underfunded in all three countries, which means that the state does not allocate sufficient resources to AE and does not recognise it as a priority, but relies on funding from international and donor organisations, which comes with its own risks. Second, the comprehensiveness of AE remains low in all three countries, due to fragmented education, labour market and social policies, poorly coordinated AE governance and an uneven distribution of responsibilities among the various actors involved in AE. In addition, AE is poorly integrated into the countries' development strategies and is not recognised as a key driver of national priorities, despite stated ambitions to drive the digital and green economy in Kyrgyzstan, promote industrial growth in Nigeria and reduce poverty in Pakistan. Third, although initiatives targeting vulnerable adult groups exist in all three countries, the overall flexibility of learning provision remains limited. as there are no operational systems for RPL, while socio-economic and geographical inequalities limit access to AE. Fourth, although there are labour market policies related to organised AE in all three countries, evidence suggests a persistent mismatch between the supply of adult education provision and labour market demand.

Conclusion

This paper examined AE systems situated at the interface of multiple national systems and characterised by a high degree of fragmentation in three selected developing countries, a field in which empirical research remains limited. Drawing on research on ALSs in developed countries – which illustrates the extent to which governance, provision and financing of AE have evolved – we find that, in the countries studied, adult education is less regulated and receives significantly less policy attention than other segments of the education system; AE systems are unsystematic and fragmented and characterised by low levels of participation in AE provision. At the same time, progress has been made over the past 15 years through the adoption of education, labour market and social policies, as well as through the expansion of programmes and provision, particularly ABE and AVE, but to a lesser extent AHE and ALiE, which provide organised AE opportunities for adults. However, to improve the AE systems in developing countries, the challenges of funding, governance, stakeholder cooperation and flexibility of AE need to be addressed and AE needs to be more closely aligned with the countries' economic and social priorities.

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