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## Even in times of COVID-19, you cannot wash your hands of ALE

By Timothy D. Ireland

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At times, we have conveniently short memories. Just over eleven years ago, in 2009, the VI CONFINTEA which was due to be held in Belém do Pará, Brazil, was postponed due to the H1N1 pandemic which was the first pandemic of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (between 2009 and 2010, more than 200 countries recorded confirmed cases of this virus). This first pandemic apparently had little or no impact on the way we thought about adult learning and education. It was an inconvenience which upset the travel plans of many delegates.

H1N1's successor, Sars-Cov-2, has had a more profound impact disrupting all dimensions of normal life – social, cultural, religious, economic, educational, leisure and sport, etc. Both H1N1 and Sars-Cov-2 are considered as pathogens of a zoonotic origin, that is, they pass from animals to humans. As Zanella (2016) points out:

The factors for disease emergence or re-emergence are little known and understood, but the main one is the expansion of the human population. Other factors include climate change, globalization, and intensification of animal production. This is disturbing, given that 75% of emerging or re-emerging human diseases of the last century are zoonoses, that is, animal diseases, which, besides causing human and animal fatalities, affect the economy of countries.

Although conspiracy theory has fabricated other possible explanations for the emergence of the new coronavirus in Wuhan (China), the majority of truly scientific studies point to the

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impact of human activity on the habitats of wild life as the major explanation for the current pandemic. In other words, the current pandemic concerns two central issues – the question of public health and the question of climate change. Despite the impact of the first, we cannot forget the second when considering how adult learning and education should deal with such issues. We could perhaps add a third central question, which appears to have dictated public policy in many countries – the relative importance of human life versus economic activity.

What then are the functions of ALE in the crisis? And should they be very different from the functions of ALE in times of normality? If we place human life and the essential equilibrium between the human environment and the natural environment at the heart of our concerns, ALE should be concerned with the well-being of all human beings which includes the fundamental dimension of our collective health and how that is or is not addressed by the societies in which we live. Well-being should not be reduced to its purely materialistic dimension but should include the quality of collective human relations and the right to health: health as a prerequisite for life and life as a prerequisite for education. Thus, discussions about the virus and its implications, making scientific knowledge available about the disease and about how to protect ourselves are all essential issues. Nevertheless, we need also to relate this to the question of climate change and how that will impact our lives and to the equally important question of democracy and democratic government. Society is based on a series of checks and balances. ALE can be a vital part of these checks and balances by forming critical and questioning citizens to participate actively in society.

At least in the developing world, the pandemic has served to demonstrate the falsity of the notion that we live in an interconnected world in which easy communication is accessible to all. Access to the technologies of information and communication is as unequal as the distribution of income. The large majority of adults and young people who are the public of adult learning and education are those who do not have access to TICs. Hence, we need to think again about our delivery strategies for ALE. How best to reach those who most need ALE? That means taking ALE to where the potential public lives or making sure that community learning centres have good access to internet. Alternatively, Whatsapp or similar applications can be used to provide a two-way link between educator and student and the continued enormous potential of radio should not be neglected. Many very successful adult education programmes were based on transmission via radio in the past.

Many years ago, Ivan Illich argued that:

Neither revolution nor reformation can ultimately change a society, rather you must tell a new powerful tale, one so persuasive that it sweeps away the old myths and becomes the preferred story, one so inclusive that it gathers all the bits of our past and our present into a coherent whole, one that even shines some light into the future so that we can take the next step. . . . If you want to change a society, then you have to tell an alternative story. (Apud Springer, 2016, p.2)

The coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated the complete incapacity of neoliberal policies to deal with this level of social and economic crisis. It has equally demonstrated the shortcomings of the existing model of globalization. Recently the narrative of ALE has been



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built round these pillars with their obsessive focus on the market and training and retraining for employment. ALE now has the opportunity to contribute to the rewriting of a new narrative in which human life is placed above purely individual economic and materialistic concerns and cooperation above individual demands. It is time, once and for all, to bury the tragic words of Margaret Thatcher that “There is no society, only individuals” – the negation of the essence of humanity.

ALE alone will not rewrite our collective narrative but without ALE, it will be exceedingly difficult to achieve. It is a narrative which will need to include the true meaning of participative democracy, the recognition of the need to revert the causes of climate change with emphasis on the respect for diversity and all forms of life, not only human. Just as we have been promising Education for All, since Jomtien in 1990, we now need to reaffirm that education for all is a prerequisite for democracy and that life is a prerequisite for both.

Timothy D. Ireland, João Pessoa, 31/05/2020