

The role of civil society in inclusive and holistic adult learning and education

Developing adult learning and education (ALE) systems sustainably requires not only the commitment of state actors but also cooperation with civil society organisations (CSOs). Through their knowledge of local conditions, advocacy reach and networks, these organisations help bridge the gap between policy frameworks and community realities. Drawing on experiences from DVV International’s global work, this expert paper shows how civil society engagement strengthens ALE systems, safeguards the interests of marginalised and minority groups, and enhances development cooperation across diverse political and social contexts.

The concept of civil society and its importance for the work of DVV International

The concept of civil society, understood as an entity distinct from the state and the private sector, originated primarily in Western societies. An active and independent civil society is seen as a key prerequisite for a healthy democracy in these societies. In Germany, for example, many people feel the desire to contribute to civic life through volunteering – whether in their neighbourhoods, in support of specific minority groups or in cultural initiatives. Such engagement often takes place in local, informal settings, including citizens’ initiatives or associations. At the same time, larger non-governmental civil society organisations play a key role in providing public services, particularly in the social sector, such as in the areas of health and education. Many adult education centres also see themselves as part of this group. This vital work is often supported by government funding, as it strengthens social cohesion, fosters democratic participation and complements state action by addressing societal needs that public institutions alone cannot fully meet.

Civil society engagement also helps communities articulate their needs, communicates them to government actors and monitors public action. Human rights organisations, environmental groups and organisations representing

specific population groups – such as migrants, older people or people with disabilities – are examples of this.

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The potential and benefits of civil society need to be fully utilised to achieve holistic and sustainable change. At the same time, the concept of civil society must be adapted to specific contexts. Many countries have different historical traditions and vary considerably in their understandings of democratisation and levels of prosperity. Nevertheless, DVV International is convinced that civil society can play a meaningful role in a wide range of contexts, provided the concept is sensitively adapted to local conditions.

Involving civil society organisations who understand people’s needs and actively represent their interests is a central pillar of development cooperation. This is particularly important at a time when such actors are facing increasing political pressure in many partner countries and civic space is shrinking. In its work, DVV International primarily cooperates with actors and organisations that effectively represent people’s interests vis-à-vis state structures and are able to engage in dialogue with public authorities. At the same time, DVV International recognises the responsibility of the state to support civil society – especially in the areas of social service provision and the development of ALE systems. Where conditions allow, we actively use the complementarity between civil society initiatives and state objectives and promote dialogue with decision-makers, which includes strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations to represent their members effectively. In every context, local realities need to be carefully considered, recognising that a direct transfer of Western notions of “civil society” to partner countries is neither feasible nor appropriate. Ultimately, success is measured by the extent to which people’s interests are placed at the centre of decision making.

In some contexts, however, certain non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operate under the umbrella of civil society while functioning primarily as professional organisations with a strong focus on fundraising and a technocratic approach to project implementation. This carries the risk of losing sight of the original mission, as priorities shift towards donor requirements and organisational self-preservation. Continued support for such organisations therefore risks perpetuating donor priorities at the expense of local needs and long-term sustainability. Such unintended effects should be recognised and monitored constantly through close dialogue with civil society partners.

Adult learning and education and civil society

For DVV international, ALE should serve the interests of people, drawing on its roots in the Enlightenment, the labour movement, and other emancipatory traditions, including the work of thinkers such as the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. In practice, DVV International systematically integrates and utilises local, regional and national interest accumulation and articulation. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the sustainable development of ALE systems that meet the needs of the target groups and support broader social, democratic and economic development. This approach is particularly important for ensuring the inclusion of all population groups and relies on close cooperation with civil society structures that are deeply embedded in local contexts, traditions and cultures.

Cooperation with civil society organisations takes diverse forms, ranging from partnerships with cooperatives and trade unions to collaboration with both formal and informal networks and local initiative groups, including those linked to indigenous or faith-based organisations. The guiding objective throughout is to secure and promote ALE as a right and a public good, beyond individual or commercial interests.

Civil society organisations are also key partners for DVV International at the supranational level. As networks and regional or global interest groups, they can represent the often fragmented and highly diverse landscape of ALE, creating an opportunity to strengthen its voice in cooperation with national governments and international bodies, while ensuring that the interests of marginalised groups in particular are represented. This role is especially important given that ALE remains one of the most neglected sectors of the education system today.

At both national and supranational levels, ALE initiatives can help counter the growing pressure on civil society. In many countries, governments are adopting targeted measures to restrict civil society activities. ALE can help strengthen civil society organisations in dealing with public authorities through training, knowledge-sharing and ad-

vocacy and by supporting them in protecting themselves against unlawful or arbitrary prosecution.

Examples from practice

The following examples illustrate the importance and different forms of civil society engagement in the global work of DVV International.

Ukraine: The role of civil society in development and reconstruction

In Ukraine, the Ukrainian Adult Education Association (UAEA) is a strategic partner of DVV International. The association exemplifies the critical, multifaceted role of civil society organisations in driving systemic change and national recovery through ALE. The UAEEA functions as a vital network hub, connecting a diverse range of ALE providers, including mainly NGOs, but also public educational institutions and private providers. This broad connectivity allows the association to effectively advocate for and implement transformative initiatives.

The UAEEA's impact extends through targeted macro-level initiatives. In Ukraine, the UAEEA develops professional standards for ALE practitioners, formalising the role and improving the quality of ALE provision nationwide. The association also contributes to strengthening legislative frameworks and provides expertise to policymakers at national and local levels. In addition, the UAEEA facilitates the preparation and approval of a training programme for local self-government authorities through the National Agency of Ukraine for Civil Service (NAUCS), signalling formal recognition of the importance of ALE in public service provision. Initially, this programme strengthened the capacity of public officials to support the cultural, social, and political development of their communities. Later, it was adapted into a short-term general professional development



Members of the Ukrainian Adult Education Association (UAEEA) during a training session in Kyiv on communication, digitalisation and artificial intelligence in adult learning and education.

programme to equip local government authorities with tools to engage citizens in the reconstruction process and to support diverse forms of citizen participation.

Tanzania: How CSOs and local authorities support each other

In Tanzania, DVV International promotes the systematic involvement of civil society organisations in its implementation of the national programme 'Integrated Community-Based Adult Education' (ICBAE). One example is the Hogoro Community Learning Centre (CLC) in the Kongwa district, where the local government cooperates closely with CSOs to offer a wide range of needs-driven ALE services. These services include functional literacy, livelihood skills, entrepreneurial and vocational skills, and agricultural training. The benefits of this cooperation are clear: local authorities benefit, as by expanding the programmes' outreach and impact within the community, local authorities are better able to fulfil their mandate for local development and service provision. At the same time, CSOs gain better access to the community, deliver their services more effectively and represent community interests in relevant public forums.

Governments and CSOs work together to address key community challenges through ALE. CSOs such as Farm Africa complement the government efforts to reduce pest infestations in sunflower cultivation by offering courses in climate-friendly agricultural practices. The Msichana Initiative, another CSO, provides peer education focused on preventing gender-based violence, promoting girls' rights, creating safe learning environments, and fostering dialogue between parents and students on strategies to prevent early marriages.

Coordination is key to providing effective ALE services: the collaboratively developed CLC activity calendar prevents duplication of work and facilitates a learner-centred approach as learners' needs directly inform the planning of courses. At the district level, the multisectoral coordination forum provides a platform for CSOs to lobby government authorities on community issues such as market access for female producers, safe spaces for women, and the prevention of early marriage. Selected topics are regularly incorporated into the ICBAE programme implementation plan by local authorities.

Ollas Comunes: A grassroots initiative in South and Central America

The ollas comunes (community kitchens) are a grassroots initiative widespread across South and Central America. Through voluntary and collective efforts, they provide food assistance to vulnerable individuals who cannot afford daily meals. Over time, these kitchens have evolved into self-managed spaces that foster organisation, solidarity, and leadership – particularly among women and mothers,



In Tanzania, local governments and civil society organisations collaborate to provide ALE services, typically delivered through local community learning centres (CLCs). Here, learners from a CLC in Kibaha District are showcasing their products during an exhibition at the centre.

who often lead these initiatives. Beyond food aid, these communal kitchens serve as important meeting points for sharing knowledge, collaborative problem-solving, and developing new initiatives.

In Peru, DVV International's partner organisation Tejiendo Sonrisas has launched an ALE initiative within the ollas comunes in collaboration with local community leaders in Metropolitan Lima: This project utilises a community-based ALE model that engages the local population and includes migrants and refugees through participatory educational methodologies. Many of the methods used are based on Paulo Freire's popular education theories. They emphasise participatory learning and value the life experience of the participants who are encouraged to engage in collective action with the ultimate goal of social transformation. The initiative has led to diverse training courses, covering topics such as nutritious cooking, logistics and organisation, leadership and community empowerment, urban agriculture, recycling and reuse.

Networking for ALE and the Andean Meeting for Adult Learning and Education

Building sustainable and effective networks that include and empower civil society organisations is central to developing sustainable ALE structures. Networks enable professional exchange, connect actors across sectors and backgrounds, strengthen lobbying capacity, and create entry points for advocacy. Cooperation with civil society networks in ALE has therefore been a central element of DVV International's work in Central and South America for over 30 years.

A tangible example of regional networking and advocacy is the Encuentro Andino (Andean Meeting for Adult Learning and Education), regularly organised by DVV International and its partners. In June 2025, the seventh Encuentro An-

dino took place in Azogues, Ecuador, bringing together over 100 representatives from civil society, government, academia, the private sector, and adult education practice from six South and Central American countries and Germany.

Under the theme “Bridges between the Formal and the Non-Formal”, the Encuentro Andino fostered dialogue between government institutions and civil society organisations to strengthen inclusive and transformative adult learning and education. Discussions addressed migration, peace, gender, climate change, and interculturality, encouraging exchange and networking across sectors. The education ministries of Peru, Colombia, and Ecuador expressed their intention to intensify efforts to recognise and certify learning outcomes from non-formal education, while UNESCO reaffirmed its commitment to ALE in the region and proposed establishing a UNESCO Chair at the National University of Ecuador (UNAE).



Representatives of the civil society network ASPBAE at the Seventh International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VII) in Morocco in 2022.

Impact on global and regional frameworks:

The regional network ASPBAE

Founded in 1964, the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) is an adult education regional network of around 250 civil society organisations and individuals across 31 countries. For many decades it has, in partnership with DVV International, consistently worked towards securing the right to basic, youth, and adult learning and education (ALE) for all. ASPBAE continues to act as a leading civil society voice not only in global adult education, but in wider education policy spaces at regional and transnational levels. It has staunchly pursued advocacy and capacity-building work for ALE, promoting the adoption of effective adult education policies and programmes, underpinned by strong public financing.

As a member of the Consultative Committee and Drafting Committee of the Seventh International Conference on

Adult Education (CONFINTEA VII) in 2022, ASPBAE successfully secured stronger commitments to gender, equity, inclusion, and financing in the ensuing Marrakech Framework for Action. In addition, ASPBAE successfully advocated for greater priority to ALE within the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015). This included securing a stand-alone goal on education (SDG4). ASPBAE also played a key role in shaping the Education 2030 Framework for Action (2015), the UNESCO roadmap for implementing SDG4, which embraced a lifelong-learning approach. Most recently, ASPBAE successfully influenced the outcome documents of two key regional and global intergovernmental processes for SDG4 in 2024: the 6th Asia Pacific Meeting on Education 2030 (APMED 6) and the 2024 Global Education Meeting (GEM).

Towards inclusion and cooperation

The involvement of civil society organisations benefits everyone: DVV International's project objectives are achieved more holistically and comprehensively; project countries and their governments receive important, competent and needs-oriented ALE services; and, most importantly, the interests of marginalised people are more adequately represented in decision-making processes at national and global levels. In this way, collaboration with civil society contributes to inclusion and gives vulnerable groups a stronger voice in forums where decisions are made. DVV International therefore continues to seek partners who stand up for the communities they represent, build bridges with government partners, and bring their particular expertise to benefit entire communities and countries.

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