Shalini Singh

BEYOND EDUCATION: MAPPING POLICY CHANGES FROM THE SECTORS OF ADULT EDUCATION TO LIFELONG LEARNING ECOSYSTEMS (1972–2022)

ABSTRACT

The paper aims at mapping the macro level transitions in global policies from adult education to lifelong learning, and hence the move beyond educational sectors towards lifelong learning ecosystems. Ehlers' Box Model and policy frameworks are used to analyse policy documents from international organisations to highlight two transitions: first, from educational sectors to lifelong learning ecosystems; and second, from the sector of adult education to adult learning and education within the framework of lifelong learning. The paper argues that the transitions are inevitable due to resource considerations and provide enormous opportunities for learners, but these opportunities are not reflected in participation. The stakeholders engaged with adult education could therefore either facilitate the transitions, shape the emerging possibilities positively, and voice the concerns of the unheard learners, or resist the transition and perish due to lack of relevance, and thereby resources, in the long run.

Keywords: *lifelong learning ecosystems, policy frameworks, institutionalisation in education and learning, policy transitions and change, adult learning and education (ALE)*

ONKRAJ IZOBRAŽEVANJA: SPREMEMBE POLITIKE OD SEKTORJA IZOBRAŽEVANJA ODRASLIH DO EKOSISTEMOV VSEŽIVLJENJSKEGA UČENJA (1972–2022) – POVZETEK

Cilj članka je opredeliti tranzicije, do katerih prihaja na makro ravni globalnih politik, in sicer prehod od izobraževanja odraslih do vseživljenjskega učenja ter posledično prehod od izobraževalnega sektorja do ekosistemov vseživljenjskega učenja. Za analizo dokumentov mednarodnih organizacij smo uporabili Ehlersov model in politične okvire ter tako izpostavili dva premika: prvi je prehod iz izobraževalnega sektorja v ekosisteme vseživljenjskega učenja, drugi pa prehod sektorja izobraževanja odraslih v učenje in izobraževanje odraslih znotraj okvira vseživljenjskega učenja. Oba prehoda sta zaradi pogojev za dodeljevanje sredstev neizogibna in učečim se ponujata ogromno priložnosti, a se to skozi njihovo nesodelovanje ne potrjuje. Zainteresirani akterji

Shalini Singh, PhD, Director, *Center for Lifelong Learning, University of Science and Technology Meghalaya &* **Visiting Researcher,** *Helmut Schmidt University of the Federal Armed Forces, contactingshalinisingh@gmail.com*

v izobraževanju odraslih lahko torej ta prehoda spodbudijo s pozitivnim pristopom do novih priložnosti ter hkrati izrazijo pomisleke neslišanih učečih se ali pa se spremembam uprejo in tako dolgoročno izginejo zaradi pomanjkanja relevantnosti in posledične izgube sredstev za delovanje.

Ključne besede: *ekosistemi vseživljenjskega učenja, politični okviri, institucionalizacija v izobraževanju in učenju, prehodi in spremembe politik, učenje in izobraževanje odraslih*

INTRODUCTION

The demand for the *right to Lifelong Learning* (hereafter LLL) at CONFINTEA VII (UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning, 2022) has sparked a debate among the stakeholders working with Adult Education (hereafter AE) all over the globe (Benavot et al., 2022; Elfert & Draxler, 2022; Grotlüschen et al., 2023; K. Popović, personal communication, 3rd July 2023). The conference outcome document marks an end to the Global Reports on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE; representing the sector of Adult Learning and Education, hereafter ALE) and induces new structures, tools, and the like for strengthening a global LLL systems. Further, the document reflects the crossroad at which several stakeholders engaged with AE are finding themselves. The dilemma is about whether to embrace the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation/UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (hereafter UNESCO/UIL) advocacy (backed by other key international organisations and UNESCO member states as reflected in the CONFINTEA VII outcome document) in favour of the right to LLL or whether to revive the weakening sector of AE and hold back against further policy change in this direction. However, most stakeholders claim to promote the interests of adult learners and contemplate a future where they are free to choose and able to learn throughout life, and be at the centre of learning societies, which in turn are contemplated as the nuclei of a sustainable future. The major discussion is therefore not about the outcome (interest of the learner) but rather regarding the provisions, processes, and the sharing of influence among stakeholders backed by the resources at their disposal. The type of provisions and processes instrumental in determining what is significant in a certain context determine what resources matter and therefore which stakeholders acquire influence. All this, however, is relevant in determining which learners get what opportunities to learn in a given context and thereby indirectly impacts the interest of the learners.

Empirical data suggests that despite a wide range of initiatives over several decades, issues of access for adult learners (in diverse ways) are a challenge all over the world (World Bank, 2022). Considerations about the quality of offers makes this even more challenging (World Bank, 2022; Singh & Ehlers, 2024). This "unfinished business" makes several stakeholders sceptical about the increasing predominance of the LLL agenda, arguing that such a *policy change* will lead to provisions where only work-based opportunities for a certain section of adults (those with resources in the broader sense) are to be promoted while the rest will be left out. The scepticism is not baseless. Research shows that an

increasing Matthew Effect can be seen even in the most resource-rich countries with high state responsibility like Denmark (Singh & Ehlers, 2024) while countries like India (where the state is withdrawing from investing in all types of adult learning) try to square off the statistics by merging the literacy figures of children and adults to show better performance against educational indicators (Singh, 2024). Comparative statistics from several countries highlight the trend to use integrated (instead of sector-wise) data to show better performance in education by offsetting and covering the gaps in AE where limited progress has been recorded (UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2022).

This paper delves deeper into this debate and dilemma among the various stakeholders engaged with AE, maps the transitions in global policies towards LLL, discusses the consequences for adult learners regarding access to learning, and contributes to develop an understanding for future preparedness regarding the same. The research questions for the paper are:

> What transition(s) can be observed in the global policies on adult education over the past half century (1972–2022)? What are the consequences of these transitions for adult learners regarding their access to learning opportunities?

The paper argues that a move towards *LLL ecosystems* (defined in the discussion section) is inevitable, but the results may vary based on the kind of *architecture* that develops to support it in the coming years. The choice among stakeholders is therefore to either resist policy changes as long as they can and avoid cooperation leading to the complete absence of their voices in the long run, or constructive cooperation for shaping a future LLL architecture with ALE included, where they reinvent their role and keep voicing their concerns embedded in LLL ecosystems.

METHODOLOGY

CONFINTEA Conferences focus on the contextual realities, challenges, and the role of AE in dealing with them all over the world, rather than merely focusing on the disciplinary aspects (Knoll, 2014). They discuss the direction in which ALE is moving and should move (UIL, n.d.-b). The type of stakeholders involved (including representatives of the state, social partners, civil society, markets, individuals, etc.), inputs (like background reports), processes and outcomes (declarations by state and influential non-state actors) of the CONFINTEA make their outcome documents relevant sources for analysing global policies. This paper therefore compares two CONFINTEA Conference outcome documents, CONFINTEA III and CONFINTEA VII, to map the transitions over the past half a century. Since the two documents focus on policy formulation, the paper includes two supporting documents: the UNESCO (1976) Recommendations on AE, and the UIL (2015) Recommendation on ALE, which focus on policy implementation.

While the CONFINTEA outcome document of 1972 argues for the development of AE sectors globally (UNESCO, 1972), the 1976 recommendations suggest how the same

can be achieved. The 2015 recommendations replace the 1976 recommendations and elaborate on why and how the move in international policies beyond AE sectors and towards *adult and lifelong education* (not ALE) within the framework of LLL systems can be achieved. The outcome document of 2022 marks a clear digression from a sectorial approach (arguing for the development of sectors in education, for instance, as reflected in the 1972 document) and argues to move beyond sectors. The document argues in favour of a systemic approach for developing LLL systems where the focus of all activities is learning for a sustainable future irrespective of how, when, where, and why it takes place.

The documents are analysed based on the following questions (Table 1): which stakeholders were involved, what was the context in terms of the time and space in which they were embedded, what content were the documents focusing upon in terms of challenges they highlighted and solutions they proposed, and what arguments they made to justify the content. Afterwards, a comparison was made to map the changes reflected in the documents. Interpretations were made using Ehlers' Box Model focusing on the rationality of policy stakeholders, and Policy Frameworks focusing on the context within which various policies have been embedded over the last century.

To further facilitate the interpretation of these documents, some sensitive information was collected from personal communication with experts closely involved with the conceptualisation and preparation of the UIL Recommendation on ALE from 2015 and the CONFINTEA VII document from 2022: Prof. Katarina Popović, Prof. Arne Carlsen, Dr. David Atchorena and Dr. Werner Mauch. Experts involved with the previous two documents were unavailable, especially because they were prepared about five decades ago. The information from the experts provided important insights to understand the rationality of the stakeholders involved and highlight the background concerns of policy stakeholders. This information is not mentioned anywhere in research publications but is relevant for the interpretation of the documents in question. For instance, the information revealed why and how certain stakeholders could not get involved during the final stages of shaping the Marrakech document and why it was both contested and justified according to the rationality of the different stakeholders involved.

Google Ngram Viewer, a database of publications on Google, is used to analyse the trends in publications. The conceptual framework includes Ehlers' Box Model which focusses on how to use policy (non-scientific) sources in a scientific way for research and *policy frameworks* to study the contexts within which these policies are embedded (Ehlers, 2019; Singh, forthcoming).
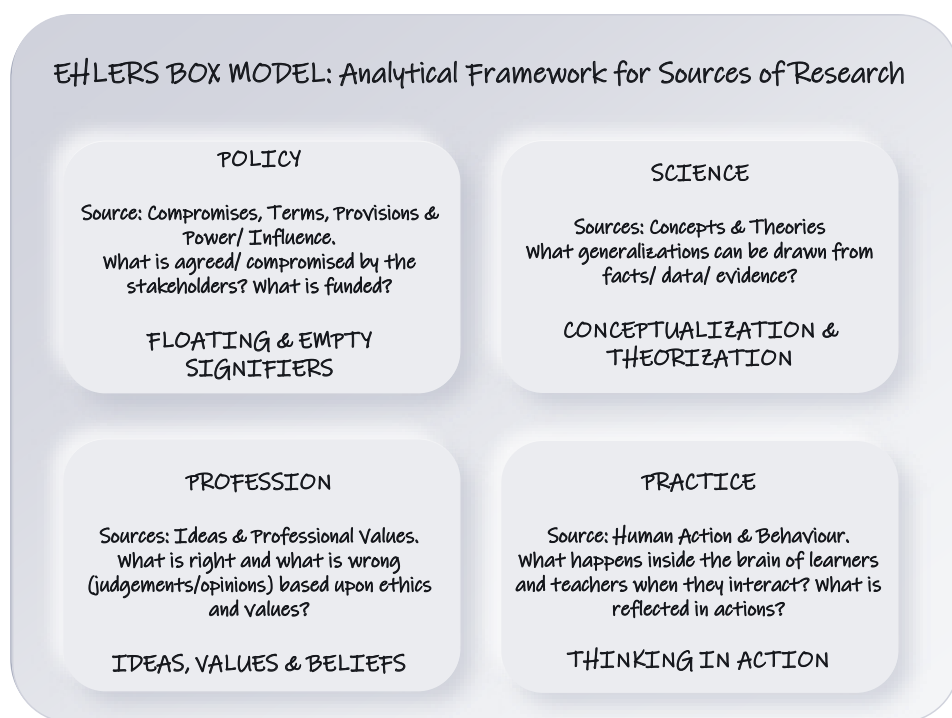
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

Ehlers' Box Model (Figure 1) is an analytical tool which differentiates between four different types of sources of research including policy, practice, science, and profession, based on the rationality of stakeholders representing each of these sources (Ehlers, 2019; Singh, 2017; Singh & Ehlers, 2019). Since policies are a result of compromise among

stakeholders, they are different from science (based on evidence), practice (based on actions), and profession (based on professional norms embedded in ideas and values). Therefore, their interpretation for scientific use should be done differently. Policies include keywords as terms which could be *empty* and *floating signifiers*. While empty signifiers are symbolic and are neither backed by resources nor intended to be implemented, *floating signifiers* change meaning according to the context. During policy analysis, it is relevant to identify these terms (which could be evidence-informed) and not assume that they have a fixed meaning like *scientific concepts* grounded in theory and facts.

Figure 1
Ehlers Box Model

EHLERS BOX MODEL: Analytical Framework for Sources of Research

POLICY
Source: Compromises, Terms, Provisions & Power/ Influence.
What is agreed/ compromised by the stakeholders? What is funded?
FLOATING & EMPTY SIGNIFIERS

SCIENCE
Sources: Concepts & Theories
What generalizations can be drawn from facts/ data/ evidence?
CONCEPTUALIZATION & THEORIZATION

PROFESSION
Sources: Ideas & Professional Values.
What is right and what is wrong (judgements/opinions) based upon ethics and values?
IDEAS, VALUES & BELIEFS

PRACTICE
Source: Human Action & Behaviour.
What happens inside the brain of learners and teachers when they interact? What is reflected in actions?
THINKING IN ACTION

Note. Created by S. Ehlers for the paper. Adapted from "The rise of a learning regime in Europe: Transnational policy terms mapped and discussed," by S. Ehlers, in T. Fristrup (Ed.), Socially engaged practices in museums and archives (p. 21), 2019, Jamtli Förlag.

As policy terms, AE, ALE, and LLL in the CONFINTEA and Recommendation documents could be identified as *floating signifiers* because they have been backed by resources, with evidence on their implementation globally while their meanings change depending upon the context in which they are embedded.

Just as concepts and theories (relationships among concepts) are embedded in *conceptual frameworks* (Ehlers 2019; Sabatier, 2007), policies are embedded in *policy frameworks*

(Singh, 2020a). To understand and interpret policy terms and overall policies (compromises among stakeholders to do or to abstain from doing something), it is relevant to understand the context around them. *Policy frameworks* comprise a vital aspect of the contexts within which policies are embedded.

A policy framework can be described as a flexible, vague, non-binding, abstract structure comprising of rules, norms, values, narratives, ideas, and the like, with ample space for bargaining among stakeholders (Singh, 2020a). It results from the bargains among the stakeholders to satisfy their interests and often changes with the change in the influence of the stakeholders striving to achieve their interests constantly during the bargaining process. While small changes can be accommodated within the flexible and vague structure of a policy framework, major changes might lead to the change from one framework to another and the rise of other frameworks. More than one framework exists at a particular time because the number and priorities of stakeholders may vary. While some could be predominant, others could be ancillary, less significant, or even competing.

The following six policy frameworks (described in sets of two to highlight the continuity among them) are relevant for mapping international AE and LLL policies (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Frameworks for analysing policies: Mapping global policies on education and lifelong learning

A Framework for Analysing Policies: Mapping Global Policies on Education and Lifelong Learning
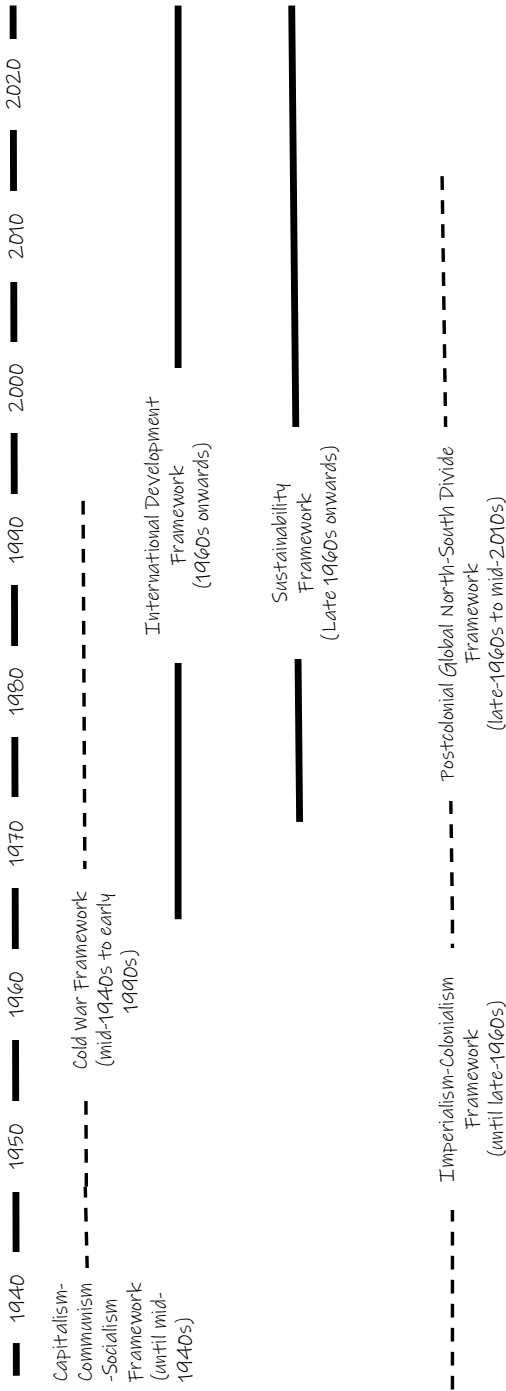
Note. Figure 2 shows a chronological mapping of shifting policy frameworks influencing global policies on education and lifelong learning. The active frameworks are shown with constant lines whereas the inactive frameworks are shown with the dotted lines. Later in the paper, policy outcomes from CONFINTEA III, UNESCO Recommendations of 1976 and 2015 and CONFINTEA VII are used to map the transition from Adult Education to Lifelong Learning using these frameworks (See Figure 2). From "A framework for policy analysis and issues of internationalisation," by S. Singh, in S. Singh, T. Fristrup, L. Sonne, & S. Ehlers (Eds.), Internationalisation @ Home, forthcoming, Novus Publishing. Source: Singh (forthcoming).

The Imperialism-Colonialism Framework (until the mid-1960s) and the Postcolonial Global North-South Divide Framework (late 1960s to mid-2010s)

The Imperialism-Colonialism Framework was characterised by the interests of stakeholders representing imperialist powers and the colonies. Several policy negotiations and international policies were driven by the bargain among them. Around WWII, colonies started becoming independent, but they lacked resources due to the exploitation by imperial powers who became rich at their cost. The arguments on international forums have often highlighted the colonial past of poor countries and claimed that even after independence, rich countries manage to manipulate international agreements in such a way that the exploitation of poor countries continues. Thus, they argued for compensation in terms of assistance from rich countries (Global North) to the poor ones (Global South) in the form of development assistance and preferential treatment in different policy areas. Education aid and investment in educational infrastructure in poor countries by the rich ones directly and through institutions like the World Bank was a part of this. Even though the terms "Global North" and "Global South" have become popular since the 1980s, the division has been apparent since decolonisation started.

The Capitalism-Communism-Socialism Framework (until the mid-1940s) and the Cold-War Framework (mid-1940s to early 1990s)

The Capitalism-Communism-Socialism Framework is characterised by events (like the establishment of the International Labour Organization) and policies (policies of the International Labour Organization) driven by stakeholders who represented industrialisation, communist or socialist movements and Capitalism, Communism or Socialism were political priorities (and not ideologies) for this framework (Singh, forthcoming). These could have been representatives of workers, industrialists, and other influential stakeholders.

Following WWII, this framework further evolved into the Cold-War Framework. This framework is characterised by cold war politics among the two camps led by the USA and the USSR respectively, and the Non-Aligned Countries which were in neither of the camps. Several education policies during that time were characterised by Cold War politics. For instance, one of the reasons why the countries belonging to the US camp channelled assistance including education loans directly and through institutions like the World Bank was that they wanted to stop the newly independent countries from accepting communism and aligning with the USSR (Singh, Schiller et al., 2023).

It is notable that even though the World Bank started its educational initiatives in poor countries under this framework, several other factors like lack of educational infrastructure in these countries resulted from the policies embedded in the Imperialism-Colonialism and the Global North-South Divide Frameworks. Thus, this is an example of overlapping policy frameworks.

The International Development Framework (mid-1960s onwards) and the Sustainability Framework (late 1960s onwards)

The disagreement among stakeholders from the rich and the poor countries found solace in the framework on development. Most stakeholders agreed that they needed development and as a consequence, four development decades (1961–70, 1971–80, 1981–90 and 1991–2000) were announced, followed by the Millennium Development Goals (Jackson, n.d.). The term *development* was a floating signifier which changed meaning over time and space. Thus, while it was interpreted as economic growth during the 1960s, it expanded to include human development during the late 1980s. This approach towards ceaseless growth was, however, challenged by another competing approach called the *sustainability approach*.

Several stakeholders often highlighted the gaps in ceaseless economic growth models and argued in favour of limits to growth (sometimes degrowth) and balanced growth (in favour of inclusion). They argued that ceaseless development was a narrow perspective of viewing how humans should live and factors like environmental degradation exposed humans to disasters and the destruction of the whole planet. Thus, the focus was on long-term approaches optimising the use of resources so that they did not deplete in the future.

While LLL (as a political priority) was initially embedded in the Cold War and the International Development Frameworks (during the late 1960s and 70s), it later became more grounded in the sustainability framework. An overlapping of both the frameworks after much struggle also led to the development of the Sustainable Development Goals (Singh, 2020a).

FROM CONFINTEA III TO CONFINTEA VII: TOWARDS THE RIGHT TO LIFELONG LEARNING

CONFINTEA III in 1972 was organised in the beginning of the second development decade (UNESCO, 1972). Both the positive and negative consequences of the first development decade (1961–70) were already visible and the role of AE in promoting development and dealing with development challenges was discussed at CONFINTEA III (UNESCO, 1972). The main background paper entitled *Adult Education in the Context of Life-Long Education* emphasised the need to consider AE in the larger context of lifelong education (UNESCO, 1972). The Conference is often described as a government conference because state representatives predominated it (Ireland & Spezia, 2014; Knoll, 2014). It reflected and shaped the governance of AE by facilitating the development of a political and legal framework around it. After the conference, it took four years to finalise the Recommendations on AE that various stakeholders should follow (UNESCO, 1976).

CONFINTEA III in 1972 and the following Recommendations on AE in 1976 reflect the strive for international development and economic growth wherein educating adults was considered relevant to deal with structural changes in the economy (Kallen & Bengtsson, 1973; UNESCO, 1972). On the one hand, stakeholders in rich industrial economies

(where education was a right, not a privilege during the 1970s due to a well-developed infrastructure and resources gained during the colonial period, later termed the Global North) claimed that the right to AE (institutionalised provisions for further and continuing education) could be extended to the adult population for social emancipation and social justice (UNESCO, 1972, 1976; Singh, 2023). On the other hand, stakeholders in poor countries (former colonies with drained resources, lacking even the basic infrastructure for education, later termed the Global South) with limited means even for basic education, who could (or willingly did) not manage to declare it as a right, organised offers for options that were not necessarily institutionalised or semi-institutionalised (non-formal provisions) (UNESCO, 1972, 1976; Singh, 2023). The collaboration among the stakeholders further reflected the Cold War urge to avoid the expanse of communism resulting from the increasing influence of the USSR due to poverty and exclusion (Singh, 2023).

The 2015 Recommendations on ALE and CONFINTEA VII highlight that human activity has consequences for the planet and thereby awareness regarding how to avoid the destruction of the planet due to ceaseless economic growth has to be developed through learning (UIL, 2016, 2022).

In 2015, while CONFINTEA VI was awaiting a mid-term review, the Education for All (EFA) and the Millenium Development Goals (MDG) period ended, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted. This was the time when the UIL (2016) released the Recommendation on ALE to suggest how ALE could be implemented all over the globe *within the Framework of Lifelong Learning.*

The 2015 Recommendations and CONFINTEA VII are embedded in the sustainability framework, focusing upon the development of humans as learning individuals who should form the core of learning societies and hence ensure a sustainable future (Singh, 2020, 2023; UIL, 2022). It is notable that even though the term *sustainable development* is used in several places in the outcome document of CONFINTEA VII, it is *not included* in the conclusive statement at the end of the document (UIL, 2022).

Predominant state influence can be seen in the CONFINTEA VII to some extent even though the background reports and preparatory meetings had inputs from non-state actors (D. Atchorena, personal communication, 16th August 2023; UIL, 2022). The organisers preferred avoiding last minute changes and therefore the physical attendance of non-state actors (especially civil society) was not necessarily given priority during the conference (D. Atchorena, personal communication, 16th August 2023; K. Popović, personal communication, 3rd July 2023). Although it was possible to participate online, the physical attendance of actors might have created a more engaged impact of stakeholders during the conference (K. Popović, personal communication, 3rd July 2023).

CONFINTEA VII advocated for the *right to LLL* including ALE (UIL, 2022). This has been widely perceived and criticised as the transition from the humanistic agenda of the right to lifelong education (extension of the right to education to the adult population) to the economic agenda of making individuals responsible for their learning and therefore

entrusting them with the duty to learn (Biesta, 2022). The argument is that while education is embedded in the democratic right of everyone to realise their own potential ensured by the state owing to social emancipation and social justice, learning is embedded in a market-based approach and models of competence (Barros, 2012; Biesta, 2022; Milana, 2012). Based on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the EU approach, the move has been criticised further for restricting education within a narrow understanding of functionality and instrumentalism (Biesta, 2022).

Google Ngram Viewer shows the declining use of the phrase AE against an increasing use of the phrase LLL in publications, especially since the 1990s (See Figure 3).

Figure 3
Use of the phrase Adult Education, Adult Learning, Adult Learning and Education, and Lifelong Learning in publications in the English language up to 2019 on Google
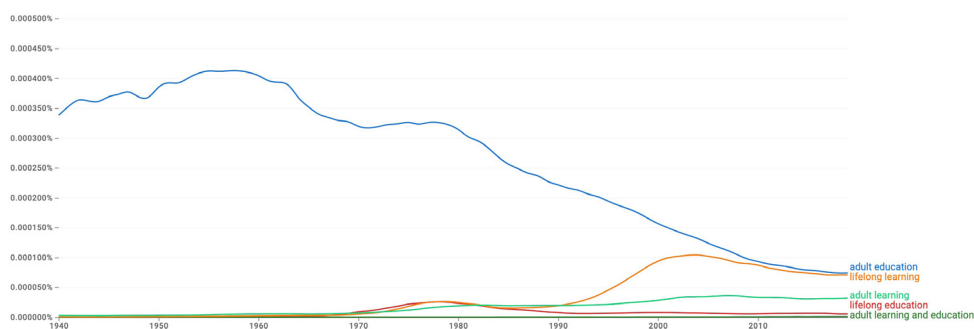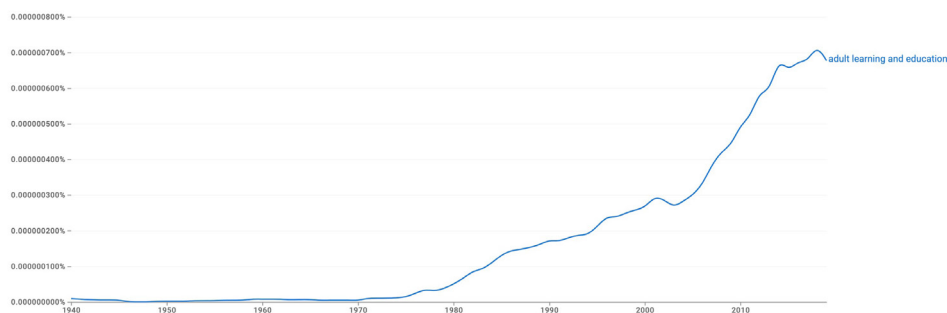

Note. Created on Google Ngram Viewer on 29th September 2023 by the author.

Further, even though the phrase *ALE* is used far less frequently than AE and LLL (See Figure 3), its use has gradually been on the rise (See Figure 4).

Figure 4
Use of the phrase Adult Learning and Education in publications in the English language up to 2019 on Google

Note. Created on Google Ngram Viewer on 29th September 2023 by the author.

An increasing number of LLL policies in the OECD-EU countries, the increasing focus on adult learning rather than AE, and the role of the OECD and the EU in promoting this has played a major role (Biesta, 2022; Ehlers, 2019; Singh, 2023; UIL, n.d.-a). Certain stakeholders fear that LLL is taking over AE, resulting in reduced resources and thereby less scope for professionalisation, research and thereby representation of marginalised learners (Archer, 2022; K. Popović, personal communication, 3rd July 2023). Even in countries like Denmark that rank high in terms of state welfare, learners are offered opportunities in alignment with their relevance for the labour market (Singh et al., 2022; Singh & Ehlers, 2024; Singh, Ehlers et al., 2023).

However, whether the AE sector promotes or impedes learning (Singh & Ehlers, 2024) is debatable and requires further evidence. While most researchers representing AE and adult learning tend to include all forms of adult learning across contexts and disciplines, disciplinary boundaries within education itself can be difficult to permeate (for instance, see Hill et al., 2023). In fact, this tendency of being all inclusive has been counterproductive for the disciplinary development of AE (Rubenson & Elfert, 2019).

Since the CONFINTEA Conferences are meant to highlight issues of AE, promoting the agenda of LLL (which they already did in the 1997 Hamburg Conference too) may channel resources away from AE (K. Popović, personal communication, 3rd July 2023). Organisations like the OECD have done so consciously in the past (Biesta, 2022) and UNESCO/UIL are following suit by various means (K. Popović, personal communication, 3rd July 2023; Singh, 2020; Singh & Ehlers, 2020).

Several stakeholders representing AE argued that during CONFINTEA VII, the participation of civil society actors (who lobbied for AE) was made challenging to ensure that LLL predominated the outcome document (K. Popović, personal communication, 3rd July 2023). The then UIL Director argued that last minute changes were not necessarily required in the outcome document, and all stakeholders had been provided ample opportunities to take part and shape the agenda for CONFINTEA VII beforehand (D. Atchorena, personal communication, 16th August 2023). Further, in UNESCO, an *intergovernmental* organisation, member states who provide resources have to be given preference over other stakeholders and they favoured the right to LLL rather than AE, since LLL already includes the learning and education of adults (D. Atchorena, personal communication, 16th August 2023; A. Carlsen, personal communication, 29th August 2023).

Even though several stakeholders perceive global conferences like CONFINTEA as a point where major commitments might happen, changes may not necessarily take place unless there is a need and practice embedded in the context, decision-makers in nation-states identify such commitments as relevant, and prioritise them in their policies by committing resources (Denholm et al., 2022; W. Mauch, personal communication, 13th September 2023). While several civil society actors argue that they may put pressure on the state to fulfil the commitments made on global platforms, for instance, at

CONFINTEA VII (Denholm et al., 2022), such non-binding agreements hardly lead to any direct change (W. Mauch, personal communication, 13th September 2023). The advocacy for the right to LLL on the CONFINTEA platform is merely a reflection of what is slowly happening all over the world, and if the declining status of AE is a concern, the efforts to revive it should precede the commitments of policy stakeholders (W. Mauch, personal communication, 13th September 2023).

What could have led to the strengthening of the AE sector around CONFINTEA III and its decline around CONFINTEA VII? Does the decline of AE imply that adult learners are going to get fewer opportunities to learn in the future?

Education specifically refers to the institutionalised delivery of knowledge, whereas institutionalisation is not necessarily relevant for learning (Jarvis, 2014). The move away from education and towards learning therefore implies that the institutionalisation of knowledge (process) is given less priority than learning (outcome). The same is reflected in the CONFINTEA III document where states are requested to support AE initiatives irrespective of the settings in which they take place since many states (low and middle-income countries) were unable to provide institutionalised provisions at that time (UNESCO, 1972). In fact, provisions regarding learning have increased with this increased focus on learning (Jarvis, 2014).

Despite being predominantly about employability, LLL extends to other aspects such as social inclusion and equality termed as humanistic (Jarvis, 2014). In fact, a confusion regarding the use of the terms adult learning and AE persists and the *term ALE* indicates that education implies learning (Conway et al., 2022; Jarvis, 2014). In the 2015 Recommendations, the term *ALE within the Framework of LLL* was used to ensure that no stakeholders working with AE were excluded while the positioning of ALE remained clear within the emerging LLL framework (A. Carlsen, personal communication, 29th August 2023; UIL, 2015). This policy change from a *teaching regime* to a *learning regime*, among other things, included a focus on the learner and learning across disciplines, settings (formal, non-formal and informal), education sectors (primary, secondary, higher, vocational, AE, etc.), policy areas beyond education (like transport, communication, health etc.), and a whole architecture supporting, facilitating and promoting learner-centric provisions (Ehlers, 2019; Singh, 2020b; Singh et al., 2022).

Are all learners equally benefitting in the learning regime? Measurements comprise a significant aspect of the learning regime with a focus on the most lucrative returns on investment in education – the working-age population and employability (Singh, 2020b). However, with the development of a sustainable approach in education, measuring the outcomes of learning only in terms of economic gains has been left far behind while a move towards broadening the way learning outcomes are evaluated and perceived, especially since the financial crisis of 2007–08, is evident (Singh, 2020a, 2020b). The CONFINTEA VII outcome document reflects the same by advocating the right to LLL irrespective of the relevance of such learning for the work-life (UIL, 2022).

Data about the participation of adult learners (for whatever contexts it is available) shows a general trend of increasing participation in adult learning activities (see Figure 5).

Figure 5
Adult participation in learning in EU countries (2019–22)

	Total			
	2019	2020	2021	2022
EU	10.8	9.1	10.8	11.9
Belgium	8.2	7.4	10.2	10.3
Bulgaria	2.0	1.6	1.8	1.7
Czechia	8.1	5.5	5.8	9.4
Denmark	25.3	20.0	22.3	27.9
Germany (')	8.2	7.7	7.7	8.1
Estonia	19.6	16.6	18.4	21.1
Ireland	12.6	11.0	13.6	11.8
Greece	3.9	4.1	3.5	3.5
Spain	10.6	11.0	14.4	15.3
France	19.5	13.0	11.0	13.3
Croatia	3.5	3.2	5.1	4.4
Italy	8.1	7.2	9.9	9.6
Cyprus	5.9	4.7	9.7	10.5
Latvia	7.4	6.6	8.6	9.7
Lithuania	7.0	7.2	8.5	8.5
Luxembourg	19.1	16.3	17.9	18.1
Hungary	5.8	5.1	5.9	7.9
Malta	11.9	11.0	13.9	12.8
Netherlands	19.5	18.8	26.6	26.4
Austria	14.7	11.7	14.6	15.8
Poland	4.8	3.7	5.4	7.6
Portugal	10.5	10.0	12.9	13.8
Romania	1.3	1.0	4.9	5.4
Slovenia	11.2	8.4	18.9	21.6
Slovakia (²)	3.6	2.8	4.8	12.8
Finland	29.0	27.3	30.5	25.2
Sweden	34.3	28.6	34.7	36.2
Iceland (')	22.2	20.3	23.9	27.1
Norway	19.3	16.4	19.5	21.1
Switzerland	32.3	27.6	22.8	22.0
Montenegro	2.5	2.7	:	:
North Macedonia	2.8	2.6	:	:
Serbia	4.3	3.7	4.8	5.2
Türkiye	5.7	5.8	:	:

Note. From Adult learning statistics, by Eurostat. (2023).

Similar trends are reflected globally due to the rising literacy figures and measurements of learning on various parameters in general (Grotlüschen at al., 2023; World Bank, 2022). However, the discrepancies in participation cannot be denied as the adult learning opportunities have not been offset proportionately in participation, thereby indicating an increasing Matthew Effect (Karger et al., 2022; OECD, 2020; Singh & Ehlers, 2024; Singh et al., 2022, 2023).

Table 1 shows a comparison of the content in the CONFINTEA and Recommendation documents:

Table 1

Comparison of relevant policy documents (1972–2022)

Comparative category	CONFINTEA III	Recommendations in 1976	Recommendations in 2015	CONFINTEA VII
Stakeholders (who)	UNESCO (82 member states, 3 non-members, 4 UN organisations, 1 observer from an international organisation, 37 international NGOs)	UNESCO	UIL	UNESCO (1126 participants from 149 countries, representatives of 142 UNESCO member states, civil society organisations, social partners, international organisations, market actors)
Content (what)	1. Need for the development of AE sectors with specific political and legal structures; 2. Creating pathways for movement between education and work and vice-versa (integrated education); 3. Integrating AE with the formal education system; 4. Perceiving AE as a part of Lifelong Education; 5. Creating provisions for AE and recognising AE outcomes formally.	1. Declaring access to Life-Long Education as a fundamental aspect of the right to education; 2. Arguing to develop AE as needs-based, contributing to development and collective advancement and thereby included as part of development policies; 3. Recognising AE as compensatory, not replacing youth education.	1. Focusing on learning (especially skills including basic, literacy, vocational, liberal, popular and community education and skills) and still mentioning education to include all stakeholders; 2. Proposing guidelines for integrating ALE within the Framework of LLL and aligning it with the TVET guidelines to ensure that all aspects of education for adults is included in LLL; 3. Identifying the primary areas of action including Policy; Governance; Financing; Participation, Inclusion and Equity; and Quality.	1. Demand for the right to LLL, integrating all education and learning within the framework of LLL, including all stakeholders for generating resources and successful policy implementation; 2. Aiming at a sustainable future, not including the term development in the final statement; 3. Adopting an evidence-informed, rights-based and inclusive approach and thereby promoting learning beyond work yet focussing on youth (going to stay on the labour market for a long time) and adults as separate target groups.

Comparative category	CONFINTEA III	Recommendations in 1976	Recommendations in 2015	CONFINTEA VII
Time (when)	Second development decade, global North--South tensions gearing up. Migration, rising unemployment (structural change in economy) and skills mismatch, labour movements, and visible problems of industrialisation.	Characterised by Cold War period, Strategy, not for individual but societal peace, democracy, and work (industrialisation), inclusion of those who were marginalised during development.	Aligned with the SDGs.	Proposed to be a part of the Transformative Education Summit in 2022 (period focussing on digital literacy, AI and green transitions). Post-pandemic period with acceptance of online participation as the new normal for more (in numbers) participation with lower costs.
Location (where)	In a high-income country (Tokyo, Japan)	UNESCO General Assembly	UIL	In a lower middle-income country (Marrakech, Morocco)
Arguments as described in the policy document (why)	To reflect the trends and part of routine conferences.	Implementation guidelines for informing member states how to proceed with CONFINTEA III outcomes.	Superseding the Recommendations of 1976 in light of changes including integrating ALE within the framework of LLL.	Reference document for Transformative Education Summit, 2022: defining the role of ALE in promoting development and a sustainable future through a *new social contract* to include everyone in learning for promoting everyone's wellbeing and a sustainable future.

DISCUSSION

There are at least two transitions reflected in the above analysis. The first transition is from sector-based education (institutionalised, teaching-oriented) to learning *ecosystems*. These learning ecosystems can be defined as learning landscapes which are not necessarily institutionalised and structured as systems, are learning-oriented, and are flexible in terms of including and recognising as many stakeholders as possible, their inter-relationships, and the outcomes of their (in)actions, and place the learner at the centre of everything. These learning ecosystems are not idealistic utopian formulations because future societies are going to be knowledge societies and those who are unable to learn will be pushed to the edges. The second transition is from AE (institutionalised or struggling to be institutionalised forms of teaching regimes for adults organised as a sector) to ALE within the framework of LLL (not necessarily institutionalised forms of learning integrated into the larger framework of LLL). The transitions are global (see Table 1) as low and middle-income countries are showing interest to host CONFINTEAs. Further, the UIL is taking

over for UNESCO regarding the global policy on AE, ALE, and LLL since the latter two documents have been released by the UIL rather than by UNESCO. Both transitions reflect the policy priorities of the policy frameworks they are embedded in (see Figure 6).

CONFINTEA III and the 1976 Recommendations reflect the juggling between tendencies for ceaseless economic growth, inclusion of the marginalised, Cold War politics, the rich–poor divide amid economies, post-colonial policy discourse, and the advantages of imperialism for former colonisers. All these factors were conducive for the development of a sector of AE, institutionalised and semi-institutionalised – as per the contextual needs and possibilities. It is notable that the idea of the social emancipatory state (where the state acts as a means for achieving social justice) was strong at that time and hence the demand for education (backed by state responsibility as a public good) was strong too. However, a close reading of the CONFINTEA III and the 1976 Recommendations documents shows that accepting semi-institutionalism and non-formal provisions where formal provisions were not possible also implied that learning or functionality (relevance of the offer for certain policy objectives, especially development) was given preference over formality (formal education).

The 2015 Recommendations and CONFINTEA VII documents reflect the widening approach towards envisioning human activity beyond the economy and beyond the present (i.e. in the future). Leaving out the term *development* from the CONFINTEA VII final statement indicates an increasing consciousness among stakeholders that development is not necessary for a sustainable future, and certain human activities termed as development like ceaseless economic growth have negative consequences (such as exclusion and environmental degradation) over sustainability. Thus, while materialistic abundance is questioned in the new understanding about sustainability, cost-cutting and thereby *institutionalisation* (which incurs heavy costs) might be scrutinised as well. Despite all the advantages that the institutionalisation of education offers, the vices of the existing forms of institutionalisation in education leading to the gratification of those who are a part of the institutions (for instance, private providers of formal education guided by profit only), systematic exclusion through education (for instance, education leading to learning poverty), and the need for cutting learning costs in order to make it accessible for everyone, everywhere, irrespective of institutionalisation, are relevant considerations for moving towards a new architecture that supports learning. Therefore, in several contexts where the state does not (is unable to) commit enough resources to make institutionalised learning possible, a transition towards the learning regime extends enormous possibilities to adult learners even with limited resources, complimented by tools like the recognition and validation of prior learning. Studies show that institutionalisation might act as a barrier against learning and in fact impact inclusion, social emancipation, and social justice negatively, for instance when profit making predominates (Singh & Ehlers, 2019). Thus, despite all attractiveness in theory, the dichotomy between the right to education and the duty to learn is not necessarily supported by facts globally. In fact, the advocacy for the *right to LLL* calls for the opposite – it represents a broader view beyond the boundaries of

Figure 6
FPlacing the four compared documents in the policy frameworks for understanding the policy context in which they are embedded

A Framework for Analysing Policies: Mapping Global Policies on Education and Lifelong Learning
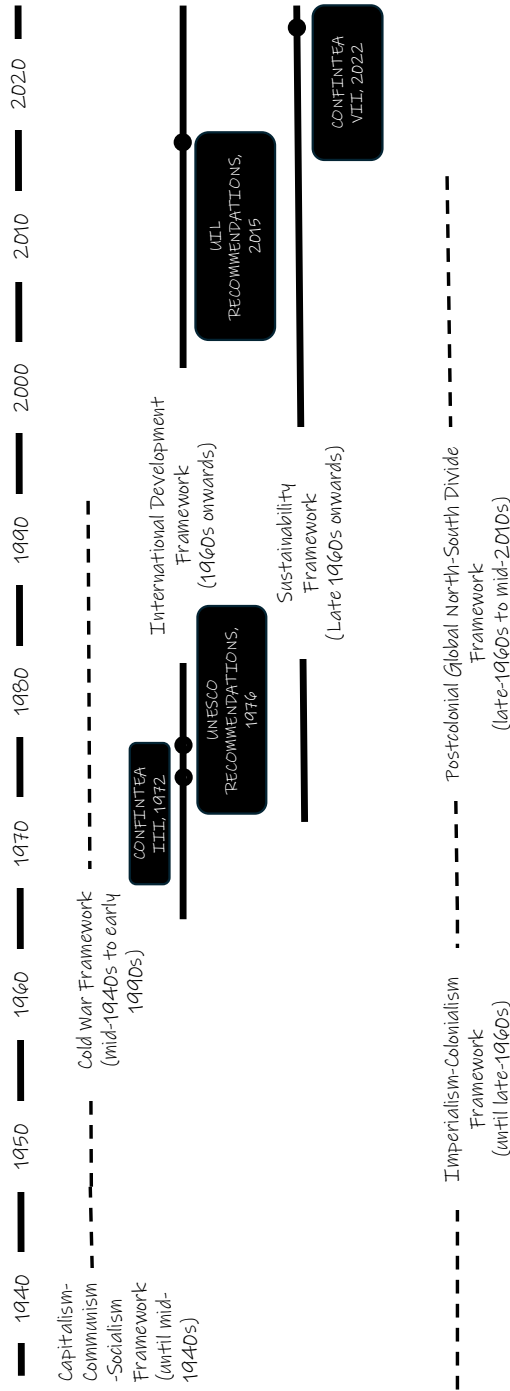
Note. Adapted from "A framework for policy analysis and issues of internationalization," by S. Singh, in S. Singh, T. Fristrup, L. Sonne, & S. Ehlers (Eds.), Internationalisation @ Home, forthcoming, Novus Publishing.

institutionalisation, i.e. *beyond education*, and tends to include learning across disciplines, in all forms, all contexts and all settings in *learning ecosystems*, which are flexible and inclusive, unlike learning systems, which can be formal, structured and thereby exclusive to those who fit into these structures.

The move beyond education and within the learning ecosystems holds the promise to free learners from the vices of institutionalisation in its perverted forms. The argument is not against institutionalisation which provides possibilities to ensure emancipation, social justice, and inclusion rather than leaving everything for a free and equal competition among unequals. The argument is in favour of new architectures that need to replace the existing institutionalisation meant for teaching (top-down approach) for specific years within disciplinary silos and in clearly defined formal, non-formal and informal settings, with institutions that suit the bottom-up, flexible learning approach across disciplines and settings, throughout life for the present as well as for the future. The existing institutions have been trying to accommodate learning by including non-formal offers, provisions like recognition of prior learning (RPL), equivalencies, qualification frameworks and the like, but the unintended consequences come in the form of a tussle between the stakeholders holding power in the old institutions but lacking the same in the new ones. A new form of *architecture* to facilitate adult learning integrated within the larger framework of LLL therefore needs to develop and is developing gradually, already evident from the CONFINTEA VII document. The other side of the coin is a declining AE sector. An increasing interest of stakeholders in investing in adult learning is further adding to the withdrawal of resources from the sector of AE.

How is this going to affect the adult learner? The adult learner appears to be gaining in terms of autonomy, low costs (also relevant for society) and more *choices* rather than top-down offers provided by authorities and providers in *supply-based models*. This transition has in fact created a dichotomy between the interests of adult educators and the free learner to some extent. A major challenge for the new architecture is to ensure that all learning in these flexible learning ecosystems is recognised and valued in some way to avoid the marginalisation of learners who tend to choose one learning opportunity over the other, as self-directed learners without the consent of representatives of the top-down, teaching-oriented, supply-based education sectors.

Has it increased access? The results are mixed because the need for mobilising and making the learner aware of choosing one path over the other plays a major role. The development of individuals as self-directed learners with the ability to navigate in learning environments (future societies are going to be learning societies) and choose the learning pathways to ensure their well-being in a sustainable manner, integration of education sectors with each other and with sectors under other policy areas (like economy, communication, infrastructure, etc.) is required (OECD, 2019). Without this integration, access might remain limited and unintended consequences like the Matthew Effect and the marginalisation of learners with limited or negligible resources might prevail (Singh, 2020b; Singh & Ehlers, 2019). The resultant flexibility in terms of modes, methods and settings, supplemented by provisions

like RPL, has increased the interest of various stakeholders to invest in learning for different reasons and thereby provided a lot more opportunities to the learner in several contexts, but is not reflected proportionately in participation (Singh, 2023; Singh & Ehlers, 2019).

The history of rights from the right to vote to the right to education shows that it takes time and critical inputs to make policies work in an equitable way because they are predominated by a bargain among stakeholders to gain power and ensure their stakes. Despite the inclusion of *empty signifiers* in policy documents, it may be unrealistic to assume that policy stakeholders would buy *good ideas* and commit resources to them or interpret them in a certain way (as concepts rather than *floating signifiers* according to what suits their interests) because of their rationality and accountability towards the *interest groups* they represent. However, to ensure that they do not completely digress to a *zero-sum* (where one stakeholder benefits at the cost of others) or *negative-sum game* (where all stakeholders lose in one way or the other) keeping the future as a parameter, the presence of critical friends from the areas of science, profession and practice is indispensable. This highlights both the need and the responsibility of stakeholders who currently represent the sector of AE, that is, to ensure that the implementation of the right to LLL is moving in the direction which is best for the learner, the society, and the planet now as well as in the future. For a start, a focus on ensuring access to all, reducing the Matthew Effect, and ensuring that all learning is valued appropriately can be considered.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis shows that in the past half century, there have been at least two transitions in relation to the education of adults: first, from education to learning; and second, from AE to ALE within the framework of LLL. In general, the transitions highlight the move away from one form of institutionalisation (right to education and sectors of education) towards another form of institutionalisation (right to LLL and systems of LLL). This has increased the opportunities for learning and provided wider access to adult learners by mobilising more resources (by engaging stakeholders other than the state which see benefit in a growing LLL architecture) and providing choice to the learner. However, the new form of institutionalisation is unable to capture the essence of learning ecosystems and is focusing merely on systemic factors. Consequently, the increase in access to learning has not completely translated to participation, and quality learning in many contexts has led to the Matthew Effect and the marginalisation of specific learning target groups.

The rise and decline of a sector of AE due to the above mentioned transitions has brought several stakeholders representing AE to a crossroads where they can either hold on, fight back and in the long run perish without changing according to the changing needs and policy framework (which represents political priorities and bargains backed by resources and not necessarily the realities in general) or they can cooperate, facilitate and even lead the development of a new architecture which is already taking shape and become the voice of the unheard in the process.

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