

Adult Education Must Be Ongoing

Literacy, or rather the lack of it, has been our bane for half a century and it is only now, due mainly to the fact that we are lagging behind in modern information technology, that we are being driven to do something about it. One of the reasons for our lack of success in this area of education is that we have always tended to treat the process of adult education as a by-product or off-shoot of general education. But the approach to adult education is, of necessity, quite unlike any imposed on small children with the result we have failed miserably to make a dent in the rate of illiteracy. Proof of this is the need for a Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA) held under the auspices of UNESCO in the first place.

By adopting a four page document defining the role of education in securing "the informed and effective participation of men and women in every sphere" if "humanity is to survive and meet the challenges of the future," the Conference brings to mind the many efforts of the past that was aimed at removing this curse. None of which were foolproof and most were ill-designed to boot. Defining education as "both a consequence of active citizenship and a condition for full participation in society," the Declaration echoes what we have known for a very long, long time that, without surmounting this problem we, as a nation, shall remain firmly at the bottom of the heap.

More than ever, we are becoming conscious of our drawbacks as the Age of Information catches up with us. In view of this, we are in agreement that this calls for expanded partnerships and are grateful that the Declaration takes time out to lay stress on the fact that "the state remains the essential vehicle for ensuring the right to education for all, particularly for the most vulnerable groups of society". The declaration goes on to say that "while recognising the diversity of political, economic and social systems and governmental structures among member countries, it stresses democratic values and calls for equal rights to life-long learning for women. It also affirms the right of indigenous peoples to avail themselves of full learning opportunities to their own languages with respect to their own cultures." The Agenda also calls for greater community participation, notably by encouraging and developing leadership capabilities among the adult population and especially among women. All well-sounding words, but these are words we have heard many times before in the past fifty years. We doubt this time it will be any different unless we put aside rhetoric in favour of action.