



Grounding global efforts in the local: A challenge for ICAE

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Adult Learning Commentary Number 26, 29 August 2001

Many community-based adult learning organisations would not have known that the 6th World Assembly of the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE, <http://www.web.net/icae>) was held in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, from 9–12 August. Some might not have cared even if they did know. This is not so surprising since the ICAE has been struggling to survive over recent years and has kept a low profile due to a lack of resources.

For an organisation struggling for credibility, relevance, resources and fair representation to draw 350 participants to its World Assembly is a considerable achievement. I had been sceptical about the value of this Assembly at a time when funds are hard to come by. My scepticism was exacerbated by the choice of Jamaica which, while a fascinating location, is an expensive site for an international conference. Travel and accommodation costs certainly limited participation. Not surprisingly, the largest contingent came from North America and the Caribbean, and the Asia Pacific region was under-represented.

ICAE and local Jamaican organisers worked tirelessly to make the Assembly happen and deserve applause for their efforts. But as a learning experience, more could have been made of the opportunity. Much of what Anne Herbert decried in her recent Commentary transpired here: plenaries and workshops with speaker after speaker and little time for discussion, papers not available in advance, and so on. Additionally, there was insufficient planning for translation, so some participants struggled to understand some sessions and other sessions were stretched while we all waited for the translations. For delegates I spoke to, few sessions resulted in new learning, but the networking in-between was valuable.

Interactions with local Jamaicans would have been good to set the scene, since the theme was the importance of creative adult learning for democratic citizenship in an age of globalisation. Ocho Rios exemplifies many of the dilemmas of this theme. It has a massive disparity between rich and poor; high unemployment; adult education courses too

expensive for many; poor people on the streets selling trinkets, drugs and sex; beggars; and food cheaper in Burger Kings and KFCs than local outlets. For locals, even access to the beach is restricted, by a daily entry fee of \$50 Jamaican (about US\$1) and a curfew of 5.30pm.

Alongside all of this, the warmth, pride, beauty, optimism and hospitality of Jamaican people shone through. Unfortunately, in presentations from Jamaican participants we did not gain a sense of how Jamaican adult education organisations are attempting to address issues of wealth disparity, access to education and employment.

For me, this gap highlighted a broader problem. As an international organisation, the ICAE must stay connected with what is happening 'on the ground'. Its success depends on the extent to which its national- and regional-level member organisations are connected with and attuned to local communities and organisations. The Assembly did recognise the need for ICAE to tune into local realities. This is evident in its declaration 'Adult learning: A key to democratic citizenship and global action', and in the ICAE's priorities to strengthen interconnected networks and to facilitate global communications and information.

Despite the Assembly's shortcomings, I came away more convinced of the value of face-to-face meetings, and convinced that e-communication should enhance rather than replace them. Without periodic contact it is difficult for international organisations to generate a sense of identity and common purpose amongst its diverse and scattered members. And ICAE desperately needs this as it attempts to recreate itself as a vibrant relevant, credible entity.

With some core funding secured for the next five years, and energised by its Assembly and new mandate, ICAE now has a chance to demonstrate its usefulness. Much will depend on the extent to which it can facilitate a dynamic communication with its regional and national member organisations and the extent to which they in turn can communicate the concerns of community-based adult learning organisations.