

ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION IN TIMES OF WAR AND CONFLICT

Findings from the work of DVV International

Wars and violent conflicts are significantly increasing in extent and intensity worldwide

with serious consequences for the lives of millions of people. Almost always, access to formal education systems is interrupted or severely restricted – often for years. Schools and other educational institutions in many places are the first to be affected by closures, and many people migrate abroad and need further education there. Adult Learning and Education (ALE) makes an important contribution in the support of people and societies in situations of war and conflict. Its importance is not limited to immediate instances of conflict; it can also effect positive change in the lead-up to conflicts and in their aftermath.

ALE supports people and societies 1) through conflict prevention, 2) through the coping with and 3) through the processing of conflicts as well as 4) through the integration of refugees. ALE thus makes an important contribution in all stages of dealing with conflicts.¹ Many partner countries of DVV international find themselves currently in war and conflict situations. The Institute therefore works with its local partners to develop educational programmes to support those affected and to address both the causes and consequences of conflicts. The examples drawn from practical experience demonstrate the full potential of ALE.

Tackling the causes of conflicts

ALE reinforces the ability of people to interact with one another in a nonviolent manner. ALE can contribute to the initiation of dialogue between people from opposing groups, to reveal prejudices and to help them reconsider existing stereotypes.

Nonviolent methods of communication can not only be used to deal with conflicts, but also to prevent escalation. For instance, ALE enables people to change their perspective in order to reflect on the causes of conflicts and work towards peaceful solutions. ALE can thus contribute to the transformation of conflict-ridden relationships. Grassroots educational work, which focusses particularly on disadvantaged groups of the population, also makes it possible to methodically reduce existing frustrations and fears at the local level. It thus emboldens a broader range of people to get involved in society. An investment in ALE is therefore a long-term investment in conflict prevention.

Through its work in more than 30 partner countries, DVV International strengthens dialogue between the state, civil society and various societal groups. Constructive relationships are built which are based on participation, active involvement, transparency and accountability and thus create mutual trust. We support civil society actors to participate in political and societal processes that strengthen the common good. Through dialogue initiated by these actors, state institutions develop a stronger orientation towards citizens.

In conflict situations: support those affected

During wars and violent conflicts, many educational institutions are faced with major tasks and challenges. Staff and teachers are often directly threatened and are then not available to continue teaching. Rooms for teaching are no longer available or are unsafe. ALE structures can often adapt more flexibly than formal systems to volatile conditions, utilise niches and quickly provide suitable programmes.

¹ See, for example, the OSCE conflict cycle: <https://bit.ly/3GBDxEr>

Civil society organisations especially are developing an impressive level of commitment in this respect and are frequently able to find creative solutions to support the civilian population in coping with the extremely stressful situation.

The need for ALE services in conflict situations is great and diverse: on the one hand, it is about counselling services and socio-psychological support that helps people continue to live their everyday lives despite the traumatic experiences of death and loss. Often, there is a great need for new life skills and employment-securing skills and knowledge to ensure their own survival or to help them build a new outlook. For example, this includes first aid courses or programmes in the medical field as well as training that helps people generate income, such as in the area of business start-ups. Not least, civil society organisations in particular are often in a position to provide compensatory educational opportunities that help to make up for shortfalls in the formal education system.

ALE can make a contribution to ensuring that lines of conflict do not remain obscured, but are instead made transparent through the participation of all societal groups, thus creating an all-round view of the past.

Coming to terms with what happened and the consequences

Conflicts from the past continue to have an impact on the situation in many countries. A deficient and inadequate reappraisal of past conflicts often leads to a new flare-up of violence, which is then sometimes difficult to contain.

There are many examples of how ALE contributes to dealing with the consequences of war and violent conflict. On the one hand, it is about coming to terms with what has happened – a topic that ALE in Germany has addressed intensively in discourses on “coming to terms with the past” after World War II, but has also been addressed by DVV International in various projects abroad. ALE can make a contribution to ensuring that lines of conflict do not remain obscured, but are instead made transparent through the participation of all societal groups, thus creating an all-round view of the past. This reconciliation work is lengthy and often painful, but it contributes to a sustainable, lasting prospect of peace. In particular, groups that see themselves as losers of conflicts are thus presented with a positive view of the future.

ALE can, on the other hand, significantly contribute to opening up new perspectives for people with disrupted educational biographies – one of the most common consequences of war and violence, especially among young people.

Support refugees and host communities

Wars and violent conflicts are always associated with a large number of refugees. Most of them are displaced within their own national borders, but often many people are forced to leave their home country. As a result, wars and violent conflicts also impact countries, regions and societies that are not directly involved.

This is where ALE structures provide important anchors for the reception and integration of refugees, as has been impressively demonstrated by the work of our partners in Ukraine, Jordan and Tunisia, for example, but also by the commitment, in recent years, of German ALE centres (Volkshochschulen) to the integration of refugees in Germany.

ALE forms a key component in the care and, if necessary, permanent integration of refugees. This begins with the provision of low-threshold counselling services to help refugees find their bearings in their new environment. Often, there are also offers for the recognition of professional skills, combined with vocational training programmes. In cases where the refugees find themselves in an unfamiliar language environment, they are additionally offered language courses, which are often very extensive. Alongside language integration, cultural and social integration is also taken into account: ALE programmes support refugees to understand their new environment and find their way in it. Conversely, by offering appropriate programmes, ALE can help to awaken understanding for the new arrivals amongst the local population and break down barriers.

Examples from our project work in wars and violent conflicts

DVV International has been involved in ALE projects for over 50 years. During this time, in our work, we have been and continue to be confronted with warlike and violent situations. Our experiences strengthen us in the conviction that ALE, as part of a functioning social structure that reliably satisfies people’s basic needs, has an important role to play, especially in these contexts. Some recent examples provide an insight into our global work and its impact.

Addressing the causes of conflict: PREVECA project in Uzbekistan

DVV International supports civil society and state actors in Uzbekistan in reducing so-called push factors contributing to radicalisation and intolerance. As part of the PREVECA (Prevention of Violent Extremism in Central Asia) project, we have strengthened the skills of a number of non-governmental organisations and local experts working in the field of radicalisation prevention. Together, we have expanded services in the areas of vocational and political education – including basic religious knowledge – as well as psychosocial, legal and medical counselling, alongside resocialisation approaches for socially disadvantaged target groups. In this context, we promoted shared values, social cohesion and constructive dialogue. The pool of local trainers was enlarged and a special curriculum for the prevention of violent extremism (Curriculum PreViEx) was developed and introduced.

ALE in war and conflict situations: Support for those affected in Mali, Ukraine and Afghanistan

Mali: New prospects for internally displaced people

In Mali, since the security situation deteriorated in 2012, more than 160,000 people have had to leave their communities in the Mopti and Bandiagara regions due to ongoing terrorist attacks. In July 2023, many people from the entire Djenné district fled to the Sio community and its main town of Soufroulaye, where DVV International supports a community education centre. In order to create a new basic livelihood possibility for the displaced families, DVV International is involved in setting up REFLECT learning circles for members of the displaced families. The REFLECT method combines participatory approaches to local development with literacy. In this way, the participants are taught basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic in their mother tongues of Peul and Bambara as well as skills for income-generating activities based on their needs, such as keeping small livestock (goats, sheep) or trading in everyday consumer goods.

Ukraine: Local education programmes for people suffering from trauma and internally displaced people

After the beginning of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the partner organisations of DVV International in Ukraine – local ALE centres run by civil society – reacted quickly and developed new services for people



In Mali, local education centres offer courses for internally displaced people. The picture shows learners in a sewing course in the municipality of Sio in the Mopti region. The bags also contain materials for income-generating activities such as soap production and the growing of vegetables.

suffering from trauma, for internally displaced people and for other interested people. The ALE centres are deeply rooted in their communities and know the mood and needs of the population well. They know how to utilise the transformative role of ALE in order to support people in need to adapt to the difficult conditions in which they live. Educational work, even in those centres which are at great risk due to their relatively short distance from the fighting, has hardly been interrupted. At the same time, the centres are places of support and coordination for civil society initiatives and volunteers who help those in need and try to maintain the continuity of civilian life.

Afghanistan: Online courses, especially for women and girls

War has been raging in Afghanistan for decades. Since 2002, in cooperation with the Afghan National Association for Adult Education (ANAF AE), DVV International has established a total of 25 education centres in the country. Currently, 15 of these centres are still run by ANAF AE. They are key contact points for the local population and internally displaced people – as well as for women and girls. Thanks to local exemptions specially negotiated by ANAF AE, they can continue or supplement their school education in person at the centre and acquire important skills for the labour market. In recent years, a wide range of online learning opportunities have also been created and utilised – since the Taliban came to power, they are the only way for many women and girls to continue their education and explore their remaining options in the world of work.

Overcoming the past and its consequences: New perspectives in Colombia

Despite the peace agreement concluded in 2016 – which raised high hopes for a peaceful future – Colombia continues to struggle with high levels of violence, crime, poverty



Participants in a training course on organic farming in the department of Nariño in southwest Colombia. New sources of income are helping the local population to find ways out of the spiral of violence.

and social inequality, particularly in the rural frontier areas. In order to counteract the factors driving the decades-long conflict, a new outlook is needed in the form of alternative approaches to living in the community and obtaining sources of income that offer the local population a way out of the spiral of violence. DVV International, along with the ADC – Asociación para el Desarrollo Campesino (Association for Rural Development) – supports the goal of comprehensive rural development as formulated in the peace agreement. With innovative educational programmes such as the Regional Peace School and the Binational School of Agroecology, alternative, more peaceful forms of living and working together as well as social and ecological transformation processes are being advanced.

Support refugees: Integration of migrants in Tunisia

In Tunisia, migration from sub-Saharan Africa is mainly concentrated in the greater Tunis area and on the eastern coast. In these areas, DVV International supports ALDA, Association pour le Leadership et le Développement (the Association for Leadership and Development), which provides migrants with comprehensive assistance for their integration into everyday life in Tunisia. The measures include the development of a handbook for learning the Tunisian Arabic dialect, exchange events with locals, the development of an awareness-raising campaign for the concerns of migrants, and workshops that aim to provide participants with solutions

to improve their (precarious) security situation. In this regard, representatives of state organisations are also closely involved.

Recognise and utilise potentials

These examples clearly demonstrate the great potential that ALE offers in providing essential aid for people in war and conflict situations. Stable structures and sufficient funding are needed for this to work. A functioning, sustainably equipped system for ALE can, in times of peace, help to avert conflicts and social tensions. But even, and especially in times of war and violence, an investment in ALE is essential and has a major impact. DVV International and its partners worldwide are committed to ensuring that the potentials of ALE in the context of war and conflict are recognised and used to a fuller extent.

FURTHER READING

DVV International (2023): Annual Report 2022. <https://bit.ly/4185MDM>

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UNESCO/UII (2022): CONFITEA VII Marrakech Framework for Action. <https://bit.ly/3RvdYLc>

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DVV International is the Institute for International Cooperation of the Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e.V. (DVV), the German Adult Education Association. DVV International provides worldwide support for the establishment and development of sustainable structures for Youth and Adult Education and cooperates with more than 200 civil society, government and academic partners in over 30 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.