

BASIC LIFE AND WORK SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR ADULTS IN SERBIA



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1. INTRODUCTION

Serbia is in the midst of a rapid and far-reaching transition, from a state once isolated from the international community, to one which hopes to become a member of the European Union in the near future. These processes are complex and entail many challenges, including changes in the political, economic and social spheres. The area of adult education and training, once somewhat neglected, is now a focus of the reform agenda. Adult education is expected to underpin many of the stages of transition and transformation. The basic education of adults has a special role in this process in relation to issues of employment and social inclusion.

Adult education experts have given a lot of thought to the concepts of skills and competences, especially in basic adult education. In the late 1980s Serbian adult educators, supported by UNESCO, started to develop models and programmes for the functional basic education of adults, which combines work skills with basic life skills. This process was stopped in the 1990s and continued only after the political changes, when reforms in a range of areas, including adult education, were launched.

This paper describes some experiences in functional basic adult education in Serbia from 2000 to the present, along with background information on adult education, including some statistical data, and a look at selected policy and strategic measures.

2. FRAMING THE LITERACY PROBLEM

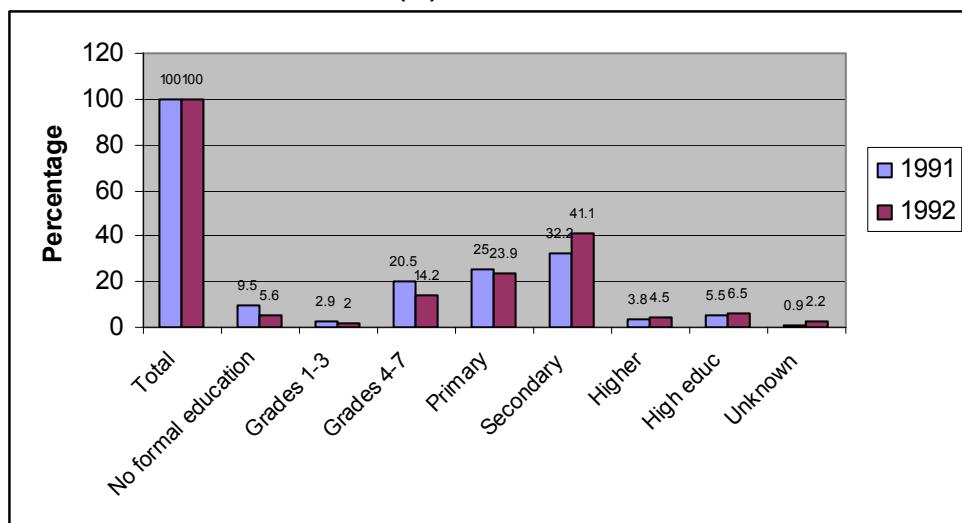
According to the national CONFINTEA VI report (Medić et al., 2009), the following issues are relevant for understanding and improving adult education and learning in Serbia:

- a low level of economic development;
- huge economic, demographic and educational disparities;
- stagnating population growth – a decrease in the numbers of children/youth and an increase in the elderly population;
- widespread poverty;
- a significant unemployment rate in individuals under the age of 30;
- poor educational standards among the overall population;
- poor educational standards even among employed people;
- unemployed people are generally unskilled or low-skilled;
- no systematic approach to adult education development (at the strategic, legislative, institutional, human resources and financial levels).

For Serbia, as a country in transition, it is crucial to overcome these economic, political and social problems and move towards a successful integration with global developments. Adult education is recognised as a vital instrument to support the implementation of strategy documents and goals, particularly in terms of economic development. Adults make up about 70% of the population, and there is strong public interest in maximising individual involvement in the process of change. In this period of transition, adult education should be considered as a major national project, particularly because Serbia has a relatively poor educational structure to support the adult population (Medić et al., 2009).

Although primary education has been mandatory in Serbia for the past 50 years, the country is facing a literacy problem. As **FIGURE 2.1** shows, although there has been considerable improvement in comparison with 1991, in 2002 the percentage of citizens who either had gone without education, or attended only grades 1–3 or 4–7 of elementary school, was still very high (21.8%). In addition, almost a quarter of the population (23.9%) only completed primary school.

FIGURE 2.1 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT – PEOPLE AGED 15 OR MORE, ACCORDING TO 1991 AND 2002 CENSUSES (%)



Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, data quoted in Medić et al. (2009)

This means that, according to the latest census data from 2002, 45.7%, or almost half of the population, were at or below the minimum (basic) level of education.

Analysing the data by gender and rural/urban areas results in the following picture: 52.1% of the total female population in Serbia have, at most, only primary education, while for males 39% have this level of education. Three times more women in urban areas are illiterate than men, and four times more in rural areas.

A large number of adults with inadequate work and life skills have significant difficulties in finding or maintaining employment.

TABLE 2.1 ACTIVITY, EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT RATES BY EDUCATIONAL LEVEL, 2010

	Activity rates	Employment rates	Unemployment rates
Aged 15+ – Total	47.2	38.1	19.2
Without education	9.2	9.0	1.6
Low	29.3	24.5	16.3
Medium	58.0	45.0	22.4
High	63.7	55.4	13.1

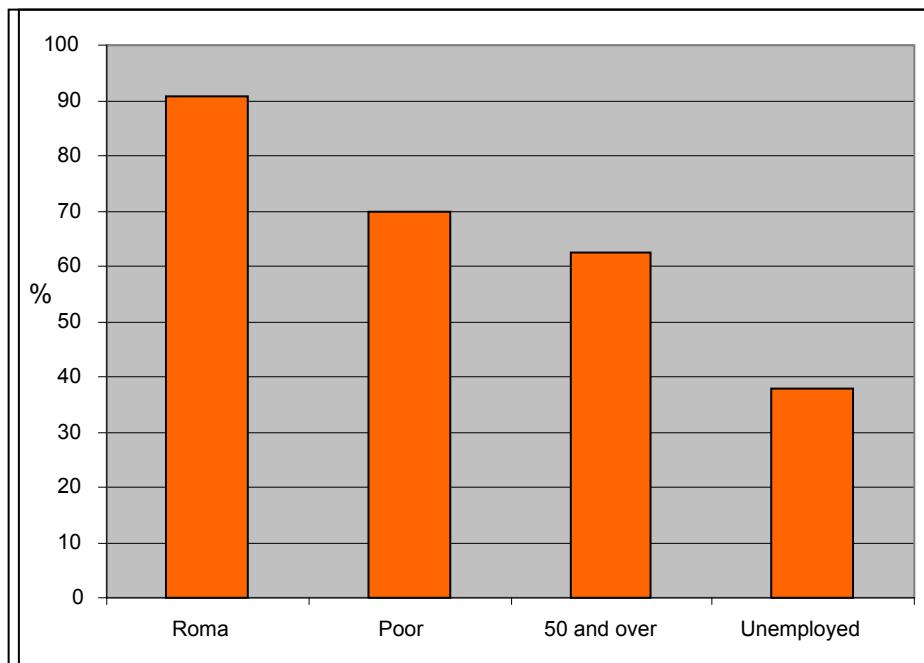
Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, LFS 2010, data refer to April; quoted in Klenha et al., 2010

As **TABLE 2.1** illustrates, both activity and employment rates are particularly low for people with no formal education or with low levels of education, while unemployment rates are high even for people with medium-level qualifications (22.4%), due to their outdated profiles or skills, followed by those with low levels of education (16.3%).

Almost 70% of the poor population have completed only basic schooling or fewer grades, while among people with higher education the percentage of poor people is marginal (2%).

FIGURE 2.2 illustrates the problem of functional illiteracy among certain groups of the population.

FIGURE 2.2 FUNCTIONALLY ILLITERATE PEOPLE WITHIN CERTAIN GROUPS (%)



Source: Medić et al. (2009)

Medić et al. (2009) frame the literacy problem by saying: 'in Serbia, no research regarding functional literacy has been made, nor does any precise estimation regarding functional literacy exist. However, data as high as 45.7% of those who finished elementary school or less are an indicator for the extent of functional illiteracy' (p. 48).

Considering these data, it is clear why adult education is understood as a basic instrument for socio-economic transformation. Adult education should respond to the needs of the labour market and thus the needs of individuals to acquire certain professional skills. It should also promote greater competition in the labour market, prevent social exclusion and support individual development and self-fulfilment. Adult education is also a way to empower people and encourage them to have more control over their lives and take on more responsibility.

However, despite the recognition that education can be a major driver of socio-economic development, many thousands of people in Serbia still do not benefit from education. As a consequence of their functional illiteracy, a significant number of citizens face exclusion from large segments of the labour market and are effectively denied full roles in civil society. This, in turn feeds into cycles of deprivation or poverty, with subsequent generations born into poverty and remaining on the margins of society.

3. KEY ISSUES AND DEVELOPMENTS IN ADULT EDUCATION – AN OVERVIEW

Despite the massive need for continuous investment in adult education, the key issues in adult education in Serbia are still as current as they were nine years ago when the problems were identified and documented in the *Strategic directions for the development of adult education* by the Serbian Ministry of Education and Sports (Medić et al., 2002). These issues are:

- inadequate policy and poorly constructed social context;
- restricted financial support – often close to a minimal level;
- lack of legal regulations and standards;
- absence of adult education sector in state administration;
- undefined status of teachers in adult education;
- no systematic statistical follow-up.

To underpin reforms in education, in September 2009 the Ministry of Education took a major legislative initiative and passed the comprehensive Law on Basic Education which regulates pre-school, primary and secondary education. A key innovation of the new law is the establishment of a framework for an integrated education policy which includes adult education as a key pillar of lifelong learning.

In 2010 the government of Serbia established a Council for Vocational and Adult Education, whose task is to develop and improve vocational and adult education. Thus, an institutional basis has been created for addressing quality concerns in adult education and systematically monitoring its development.

One of the most important contemporary issues that affects all aspects of educational reform is the legal regulation of adult education. The Adult Education Law (Ministry of Education, 2010) will cover for the first time formal, non-formal and informal education. It will define the objectives of adult education, as well as its principles, participants and activities. Particular attention will be paid to ensuring the quality of adult education by defining standards for programmes, providers and teachers. The law will specifically regulate adult education programmes, but also the qualifications of experts working in the field. Responsibilities for non-formal education will be identified and the process of accreditation and certification regulated so that non-formal education and training can be assessed and recognised. One of the key issues is financing, which should be, as far as possible, based on the principle of social partnership.

Despite significant changes and initiatives, Popović (2010) argues that governments in South-East Europe, including the Serbian government, who all signed up to the goals of the 'Dakar Framework for Action' and the Unesco 'Education for All' agenda, may still be underestimating the problem of functional illiteracy and not doing enough to address it. These countries need to adopt a systematic approach, with comprehensive actions and long-term solutions.

4. BASIC ADULT EDUCATION – THE CURRENT SITUATION

In Serbia the concept of ‘basic skills’ or ‘literacy’ is usually associated with having attended basic education: ‘The definition of literacy in the 2002 census remained the same as the one used in the 1991 census: persons who have finished more than three grades of elementary school are considered literate. Also, persons who have finished one to three grades of elementary school, as well as persons without formal education, who are able to write and read short texts about everyday life, are considered literate’ (Medić et al., 2009, p. 57).

Adult basic education is organised in primary schools in the formal education system. Currently, there are 14 schools for the elementary education of adults, with about 2 500 students per year – a drop in the ocean compared to the 1.3 million people in Serbia who did not complete primary education. Basic adult education is organised by grades – from grade 1 to grade 8 – and its duration varies from three to five years depending on the programme (Ministry of Education, 2009, Art. 94). Adult learners have the opportunity to attend regular classes, and can also have personal consultations with teachers. After completing the 8th grade, adult learners may continue formal education and obtain further qualifications. Basic education for adults is free, i.e. it is state-funded (Art. 91). However, the national CONFINTEA VI report points out that ‘it is not clearly stated in the budget how much money exactly’ is allocated for adult education (Medić et al., 2009, p. 59). Klenha et al. (2010) reiterate this problem, saying: ‘formal adult education does not have a separate budget line, so it is not possible to identify how much is allocated for adults within the budget lines for primary, secondary and higher education’ (p. 5).

It should be mentioned that there are a significant number of, mainly donor-supported, NGOs that deal with basic skills provision in relation to specific target groups, such as women or Roma people. However, such projects are not subject to systematic data collection or monitoring. Literacy levels attained informally are not usually taken into account when deciding whether to allow people to continue their education within the formal system. Popović (2010) argues that ‘if literacy was to enable people to continue their education, it would have to be acquired within the formal education system, because there are no mechanisms for the assessment of prior learning and for the recognition of literacy competences acquired in non-formal settings’ (p. 21).

Adults are given the opportunity to complete elementary school in four years, a process which takes eight years for children, i.e. the programmes used for adults are reduced in size. They are not adapted to adult needs and characteristics. No specific textbooks have been designed for adults – the content of learning materials is tailored to children’s needs. Furthermore, teaching methodologies are not adapted to the specifics of adult learning and the majority of teachers lack specific andragagogical, didactic and methodological knowledge and skills. All this leads to adult education courses of general low quality.

This may discourage learners and demotivate them when it comes to engaging in further education and learning. In addition, adult learners tend not see a clear connection between learning and real life, although such a connection could be a strong motivator. However, people are demotivated principally because, after four years of schooling, they do not obtain any recognised qualification, and vocational training is not considered an integral part of the programme, although they can continue with further formal education.

This shortcoming was the starting point for the pilot project ‘Functional Basic Education of Adult Roma’, discussed below. In addition to these issues, Popović (2010) considers that one of the main reasons for the scant attention paid to literacy promotion is that ‘education is not held high in the value system; therefore illiterate people are not motivated to obtain literacy

skills as the first step of a long educational journey leading potentially nowhere' (p. 7). Hence, the existing system of adult basic education can be considered inadequate and dysfunctional. It ignores the needs of adults and their specific roles in life. Furthermore, it is not adapted to labour market needs, existing rather in a kind of vacuum, separate from the real world.

5. FUNCTIONAL BASIC EDUCATION OF ADULT ROMA PROJECT – DESCRIPTION AND KEY RESULTS

The Functional Basic Education of Adult Roma (FBEAR) project was arranged as a joint initiative by the Ministry of Education, the National Council of the Roma people, the Institute for Pedagogy and Andragogy, the Adult Education Society, and other partners. Funding was shared by the Roma Education Fund and the government. The underlying idea of the project was to combine elementary education with basic vocational training in a programme leading to the award of recognised certificates. The curricula were to be orientated specifically towards the target group and the labour market.

The project was implemented in 11 municipalities: Belgrade, Zemun, Obrenovac, Valjevo, Nis, Rovinj, Leskovac, Vranje, Sombor, Ada and Bujanovac. Project participants included adult Roma aged 15 to 35 who had not completed primary education or obtained any qualifications from regular schooling.

For the first time in Serbia's formal adult education sector, this project was focused on 'functional' basic adult education. Although the programme was based on traditional school subjects, the underpinning concept was that of basic life and work skills. New curricula for grades 7 and 8 were designed and new subjects defined.

Basic life skills

The following new courses were introduced:

- responsible living, which includes the development of knowledge, skills and competences in the following areas:
 - health, nutrition, AIDS prevention, and related subjects;
 - family life, marriage, children's education, violence in the family, and other domestic issues;
 - communication and soft skills;
 - environmental protection;
 - orientation and the skills needed in the use of technologies in everyday life;
- active citizenship (roles, rights, responsibilities, functioning democracy...).

Traditional subjects, such as mathematics and physics, became outcome-focused and orientated to the development of basic work and life skills.

Basic work skills

The concept of functional basic education was broadened to include work skills as an inherent part of the basic skills approach. The following courses were included:

- information technologies;
- entrepreneurship and active employment or self-employment;
- vocational skills for certain occupations (training for 15 vocational profiles in line with labour market needs).

Teachers and other staff

Teachers and school staff were trained in adult learning methodologies and how to implement the programme (e.g. functional outcomes and using a skills-based approach).

During the project it became clear that additional support and assistance were needed in the process of acquiring basic life and work skills, especially for those who had been out of formal education for a long time. This was necessary both to keep them in education, but also to maintain their motivation and help them achieve the desired results. To meet these goals a new element was introduced to the project – Roma assistants to the teachers were hired to help support the students in their learning. In particular, their roles and tasks included:

- to contribute to the design of didactic materials, alongside the curricular team and subject teachers;
- to help adult students with all school and learning related issues;
- to help learners with various social issues, thus removing some of the barriers that participants face to learning;
- to contribute to the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the project.

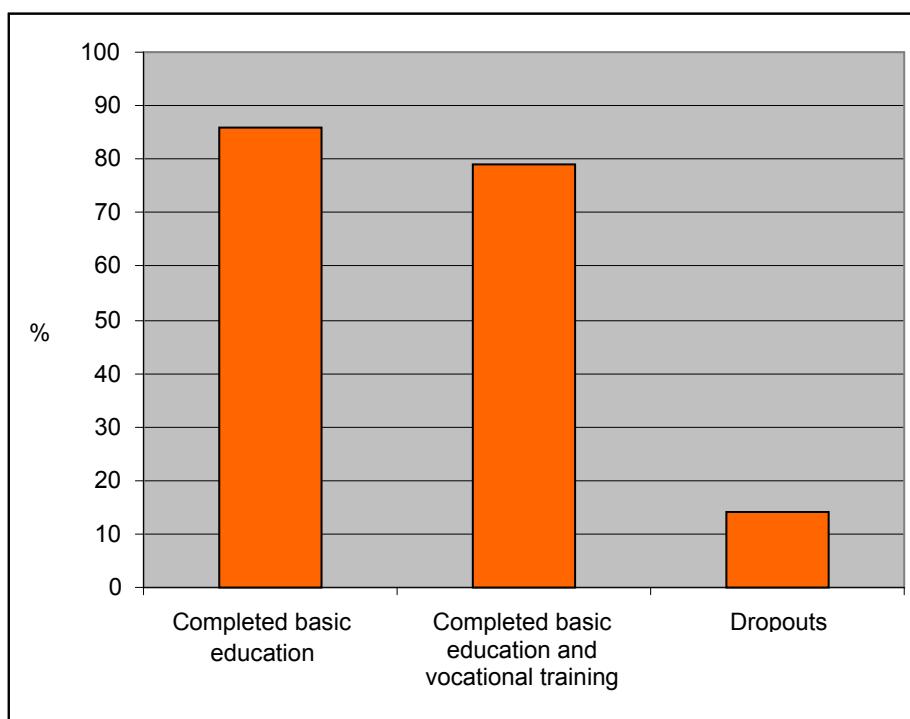
Certification

One of the tasks of the FBEAR project was the development and establishment of a certification system for short-term vocational training. As mentioned before, Serbia does not have an institutional framework or established procedures for certifying such training, nor can secondary schools or other adult training providers issue certificates for successfully completed training courses which are recognized in the labour market in Serbia. To this end, for the purposes of this project, the Ministry of Education and Sports, the National Employment Service and employers' representatives (the Union of Employers and Chamber of Commerce) cooperated intensively to devise a system of certification that was integrated into the pilot programme.

Project outcomes

The Roma who were involved in the programme achieved significant and lasting benefits. Of the total 275 participants, 86% completed the 7th or 8th grade of elementary education, while 79.2% completed the basic training for certain occupations, as **FIGURE 5.1** illustrates.

FIGURE 5.1 PROJECT RESULTS – NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS WHO COMPLETED WHOLE OR PART OF THE PROGRAMME AND NUMBER OF DROPOUTS (%)



Source: Medić et al. (2010)

Although the majority of participants completed the course, a certain percentage (c. 14%) dropped out. The reasons for this were diverse. In addition to financial difficulties and problems with the reimbursement of transportation costs, personal reasons, issues connected with the working method of the Roma coordinators and problems occurring in the community were cited as reasons for failure to complete the programme. It is essential to understand the roots of these problems, so that in future they can be anticipated and, as far as possible, controlled, in order to minimise the dropout rate. Apart from understanding the characteristics of a certain target group, it is important for teachers to develop empathy, to recognise their students' various individual problems and to be able to respond to them.

The majority of students trained as assistant hairdressers and tailors. According to the project's final report, from among the students who completed various training programmes 53 (31.7%) were immediately employed, five students continued in education, six had existing business, two had plans to run their own businesses, and 45 of them found a job within one year after the completion of the project. In all schools learners rated the two new subjects 'Responsible living' and 'Entrepreneurship and active employment' especially highly and found them most useful in their everyday lives.

Thus, the FBEAR project represented an important first step for further developing the field of adult education in line with functional literacy goals. As mentioned above, understanding the particular situation of the learners is key to preventing students dropping out. Also, the introduction of Roma assistants proved to be a particularly valuable and effective way of assisting teachers, considerably improving the communication between teachers and learners and adding value to the teaching process.

Apart from providing basic education for adult Roma, a possible systemic solution that also addresses the needs of other Serbian adults with similar problems was identified and tested.

This **functional basic education model**¹:

- combines the completion of primary education with skills development to allow adults to perform to their potential, within the context of their previous experiences and ability, while responding to national and cultural characteristics and labour market needs;
- establishes functional connections between the content of general education and vocational training so that general subjects support and facilitate the successful acquisition of professional knowledge and skills;
- promotes effective cooperation between primary schools and vocational education institutions while carrying out basic education courses for adults;
- opens the way to further education, including vocational courses;
- establishes precisely defined objectives and tasks for education, teaching and learning that allow for an individual approach to learning aligned with learners' previous experience and acquired knowledge;
- establishes horizontal and vertical connections between different subjects of educational programmes that meet learners' developmental needs and their needs for specific knowledge and life skills;
- delivers vocational training based on occupational standards and labour market needs;
- allows for a modularisation of training programmes where necessary and possible;
- brings together, from an organisational and programme point of view, primary schools, primary adult education schools, vocational schools, local communities and the labour market;
- is sensitive to the training needs of particular target groups.

Moreover, the project had an impact not only on the direct participants, but also on a number of project partners. These indirect beneficiaries notably included the following.

Local educational institutions and their teaching and professional staff

Local educational institutions, including both primary and secondary vocational schools and schools for adult education, obtained the necessary equipment and teaching aids. These comprised the *Manual for the implementation of primary school curriculum for the purposes of FBEAR* and guidelines for designing didactic materials. Thus, new active teaching methods were tested, with the learners and the Roma assistants involved in both their preparation and implementation, thus creating the conditions to create a better and more effective teaching and learning process. Thanks to the FBEAR pilot, teachers and professional staff from local schools benefitted from seminars where they acquired new knowledge of how to develop methodical competences for the functional basic education of adults, which helped them in their implementation of the curriculum and enhancing students' motivation.

Head office and local branches of the National Employment Service

Originally planned as implementers of the FBEAR pilot project, the National Employment Service (NES) was another indirect beneficiary of the project. According to the final external evaluation, in the course of implementation local labour office staff started to realise: (i) the usefulness of training plans tailored to local labour market demands; (ii) the rigid nature of specific procedures used by the service, particularly in relation to paying training participants transport costs; (iii) the added value of a partnership with relevant stakeholders in reducing the number of unemployed people; and (iv) the barriers for work created by the centralised management setting of the NES and the lack of independence of the local labour offices. Finally, to systematise pilot results, there was recognition that the NES would have to determine local labour needs and commission relevant training.

Relevant government institutions at the national level

Within the framework of the FBEAR project different innovations were designed and tested with a view to meeting the education and training needs of disadvantaged groups of adults, particularly Roma. However, the undeniable and most important outcome of the FBEAR

¹ For further details, see Medić et al., 2010.

project lies in the fact that the solutions tested are transferable to a variety of settings and that they can influence the whole set of national strategies and legislation in adult education. The pilot project involved a wide range of partners and their collaboration at the local level proved highly useful for all beneficiaries, including participants, schools and employers. The list of training programmes could be expanded in accordance with current and future community development goals.

6. THE SECOND CHANCE PROJECT – TOWARDS A SYSTEMIC DEVELOPMENT OF PRACTICE-ORIENTED BASIC ADULT EDUCATION

The results of the FBEAR project opened the door to the establishment of a flexible functional system of basic adult education available to everyone aged over 15 who had not acquired compulsory education in the regular school system. The training offered should be flexible enough to meet the different needs of adults, and aim to eliminate any potential obstacles to learning. It should be organised in such a way that it corresponds to the needs and potential attainment of the participants, and is quick to respond to changes in the environment, particularly changes in the labour market.

The Second Chance project (2010–13) is supported by the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and the Serbian Ministry of Education. The project aims to establish a system of functional elementary education for adults (FEEA), which is accessible to learners and responsive to their needs, as well as to those of the labour market, in line with the concept of lifelong learning and focusing on life skills and competences. The system will provide expertise and support for creating up-to-date, second-chance education opportunities to enable everyone in Serbia over the age of 15 years to complete elementary education and acquire professional skills.

The functional elementary education for adults will be organized into three annual cycles. The first cycle (grades 1 to 4) covers functional literacy, or the acquisition of basic language and mathematical literacy. The second cycle (grades 5 and 6) provides a general elementary education and a set of key competences to facilitate further education and the transition to the labour market, while the third cycle (grades 7 and 8 and professional skills) offers core knowledge and key professional skills that will improve learners' employability and promote further professional development. All those who successfully finish the functional elementary education programme will receive a nationally recognised diploma for completed elementary education and a certificate of vocational competence.

The project will have to address and provide feasible solutions to a number of important issues, such as:

- the consolidation of experience gained in previous projects, including FBEAR and CARDS;
- the setting up of meaningful and operational partnerships at national and local levels;
- the provision of incentives for the most vulnerable and difficult-to-employ people (targeted by the FEEA project) to enrol in and to complete the courses offered;
- vocational skills offered must match the current and future needs of regional or national labour markets, as outlined in the national economic development documents of the country.

The ultimate target group of the project are adults aged 15 years and over, with incomplete elementary education and/or without vocational qualifications. Priority will be given to unemployed people, members of ethnic groups (especially Roma), women and people from rural areas, as well as redundant workers and those at the risk of losing their job.

It is particularly important to create greater consistency between curricula, school staff, learners and local stakeholders, including employers. In this spirit, a respective FEEA strategy will be developed, curricula designed and tested, and the human resource capacity for FEEA implementation strengthened. Hence, school principals, teachers, assistants and other pedagogical staff are another major target group for this project, and they will have to acquire new skills or upgrade their existing skills in delivering functional elementary education to adults.

The project started in autumn 2010 and will last for three years. It is estimated to involve some 4 000 participants. Some 80 elementary schools and 75 vocational schools will be involved in the implementation. Expected outcomes include:

- a decrease in the number of young people aged 15 to 24 who have no occupation;
- an optimisation of the network of elementary and secondary schools by expanding schools' functions to incorporate educational services for adults and young people who have left the formal education system;
- the implementation of activities, as envisaged by the Strategy and the Adult Education Action Plan;
- support for the education of adult Roma as one of the most vulnerable groups in the labour market.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of solutions and lessons learned from the ‘Functional Basic Education of Adult Roma’ (FBEAR) pilot project have already found their way into systemic adult education reforms. For example, the draft of the new Adult Education Law considers the following recommendations from the FBEAR project:

- the inclusion of an andragogical assistant (evolved from the role of Roma assistant);
- the new understanding of the concept of functional basic adult education;
- new programmes for functional basic adult education;
- recognition of the training provided as planned in the framework of the FBEAR project, i.e. under the auspices of an accreditation centre to be established under the new Adult Education Law;
- new standards for the training of teachers and trainers in adult education.

In addition, the draft of the new Adult Education Law reflects some of the experiences from other projects (CARDS programme on education, IPA VET project), including initiatives such as:

- the establishment of model centres, i.e. regional training centres for adult continuing vocational education;
- prior learning assessment;
- embracing the variety of adult education and learning providers;
- responsibility for training the trainers given to the professional andragogical association.

The following issues and experiences from the project are still not adequately reflected in current educational reforms, but should be taken into account in the very near future.

- Adults are motivated to learn only by education that is close to their interests and needs. They need to have a clear vision of the value and usefulness of acquired knowledge – for example they can see that it is recognised by the labour market. Thus, the basic adult education standard becomes more complex through linking it with skills needed in the labour market. The concept of basic life skills is not sustainable without being connected to work skills.
- The functional basic education of adults has to include both life and work skills in terms of both the contents of the programmes and the approach to curriculum development and implementation.
- The concept of basic life skills shifts the focus of programmes away from standard formal programmes of primary education for children to the concept of key competences of functional literacy.
- It is important to acknowledge the specific needs and life roles of the different target groups (Roma, women, rural people) in tailoring courses to develop basic life and work skills.
- Various providers of basic skills and their achievements should be taken into account in the course of further reforms of basic education.
- Prior learning assessment should be organised to establish different levels of adults’ basic skills, both in terms of general and vocational skills, and to allow for vertical and horizontal permeability within the educational system.
- The links between different projects in the field of adult education should be strengthened, especially between life skills and vocational training, in order to achieve synergy effects and sustainability. Adult education particularly requires social partnership – from the conceptualisation phase to financing.

- Strategies, action plans, projects and measures in the area of adult education should be connected with the strategies for learning and training in other areas.

Bearing in mind that human resources are key to economic development and a central factor for positive social change, it is clear that functional illiteracy – which affects almost half of the Serbian population – can hold back more dynamic and effective reforms. The acquisition of knowledge essential to modern life and work is a prerequisite for individual citizens to lead an accomplished, satisfying and successful life, and for enabling dynamic social and economic development.

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