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Conference organization as an adult learning experience
An analysis of the Brazilian perspective on CONFINTEA VI

La organización de la conferencia como una experiencia de aprendizaje de adultos
Un análisis de la CONFINTEA VI desde la perspectiva brasileña

CONFINTEA VI was held in Belém do Pará (Brazil) in December 2009. This article analyses the organization of the conference as an adult learning experience from the Brazilian perspective employing and integrating theories related to learning communities and the systematization of experience within the general framework of popular education. It argues that analysis of international conferences as learning experiences from the organizational perspective are rare in the literature. On the basis of the evidence it suggests that after six International Conferences on Adult Education held over the last 60 years, using similar formats, it would perhaps be relevant to submit the CONFINTEA process and event to a more rigorous evaluation.

KEYWORDS: CONFINTEA, conference organizing, learning communities, systematization of experience, popular education.

La CONFINTEA VI se realizó en Belém do Pará (Brasil) en diciembre de 2009. Este artículo analiza la organización de la conferencia como una experiencia de aprendizaje de los adultos desde la perspectiva brasileña, en la que se emplearon e integraron teorías relacionadas a comunidades de aprendizaje y la sistematización de experiencias en el marco general de la educación popular. Estos argumentos para el análisis de conferencias internacionales como experiencias de aprendizaje son raros en la literatura existente. Con base en la evidencia se sugiere que después de seis conferencias internacionales sobre educación de adultos realizadas los últimos 60 años, usando formatos similares, tal vez sería relevante someter el proceso y evento de la CONFINTEA a la más rigurosa evaluación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: CONFINTEA, organización de conferencias, comunidades de aprendizaje, sistematización de experiencias, educación popular.

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The Sixth International Conference on Adult Education was held just 60 years after the first in Elsinore in 1949. Documentation on the conferences deals largely with increasingly complex processes of macro-organization, reporting and mobilization during the preparatory phase for each conference and subsequently on the outcomes, commitments and recommendations generated by the conferences. There is, however, little analysis of the micro-organization of the conferences.

Concerns as to whether there is any internal consistency between the broad themes which orientate debates and the conference structure, about the impact of the conference on the social and natural environment, about the involvement of the local community in the conference process are rarely treated in the literature.

Discussion on the learning process implicit in the organization of an International Conference which mobilizes hundreds of thousands of people world wide in its different phases – global, regional and national preparations, direct participation at the conference and that small army engaged in organizing and structuring the contents and in providing the infra-structure and logistics on which the conference is built, is equally scarce. It would seem that as a new army faces the challenge of each edition of CONFINTEA there is little collective memory as to the internal mechanics and dynamics of the previous conference apart from those rules and regulations which determine the formal organization and structure of all category II conferences.[1]

This article, in the best Latin American tradition of popular education and democratic participation, sets out to construct what I classify as an analytical systematization of the Brazilian side of the organization of CONFINTEA VI as an adult learning experience. As Oscar Jara (2006) suggests in his book on systematization, the principal objective of this process for those involved in popular education, is that of extracting lessons from an experience, in order to share them with others. "In the same way that, inversely, being ready to learn from the experience of others, should be a permanent attitude of those who believe that they do not possess definitive truths nor are developing perfect practices. Learning and sharing are, thus, two verbs which cannot be separated from the exercise of sytematization."

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[1] See UNESCO Basic Texts (2004).

In the division of responsibilities established after the Brazilian candidacy to host the conference was finally approved, the overall responsibility for organising the event was delegated to the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in Hamburg by the Organisation's General Conference.[2] Subsequently, a Host Country Agreement was signed with the Brazilian Government on the basis of which Brazil took responsibility for choosing the host city and providing the necessary infra-structure and logistics for the Conference.

The basis for this analysis is an attempted synthesis and adaptation of theories of learning communities and those of systematisation as a fundamental instrument for any educational learning process. The analysis is guided by three basic principles which came to direct and establish a degree of intellectual organicity with the organizational process: respect for the culture of sustainability, respect for democratic, inclusive and supportive participation and that for the indissociability between education and culture.

The article is structured around four sections. The first provides some background information to the process which led to the city of Belém being chosen as the host for CONFINTEA VI and to the first steps in the organizational process. The second discusses, defines and seeks to integrate the two theoretical approaches used to understand the process of organization under analysis – the systematization of experience and learning communities. The third section presents an analysis of the organization of the Conference structured around the three basic principles outlined above. The final section points to lessons learnt from the experience which may be of use to those responsible for organising the next CONFINTEA, for those organising other conferences and seminars and for the general community interested in understanding the dynamics of such an international conference.

In consonance with the concept of lifelong learning as developed over the last forty years beginning with the Faure Report in 1972 and developments in the field of popular education over the same period, this article takes as its overall framework that understanding of adult learning and education, as a process which extrapolates the formal boundaries of educational institutions and permeates diverse contexts, both non-formal and informal. Jara (2010) identifies two current trends in education – one which argues for an education that adapts itself to the changing globalized world and the other which argues in favour of an education that contributes to changing the world, making it more humane. As he points out, it is more common than we imagine to consider that the only way to learn is from books or courses and to relegate our own experience as a fundamental source of learning to a minor role. Jara (2006) concludes by stating that unfortunately we have been formed in an educational scheme in which "life and study are seen as two separate things, and we neither generate the habit nor the belief in the importance of 'studying' our own practice".

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[2] The 33 C/Resolution 5 of the General Conference invited the Director-General "to make the necessary arrangements to organize the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) in 2009 […]". Further decisions concerning the organization of the conference are contained in 175 EX/10, Paris, 11 August 2006, and 175 EX/Decision 9, adopted by the 33rd Session of the General Conference of UNESCO and Draft Resolutions 2008-2009 (34 C/5 Vol.1, 2nd Version), debated during the General Conference of UNESCO in Paris, in the period 12/10 – 03/11 2007.

1. Background information: in search of a venue

As stated in the preparatory documents for CONFINTEA VI, the overall thrust of the Conference was "to draw attention to the relation and contribution of adult learning and education to sustainable development, whereby sustainable development is interpreted as encompassing a social, economic, ecological and cultural dimension" UNESCO/(UIL, 2008). This then became one of the principal criteria for the selection of the city to host the conference. Large international events in Brazil tend to gravitate round the Rio – São Paulo – Belo Horizonte – Brasília axis. The first decision taken by the local organizers was to seek a venue in the north or northeast regions of the country both for their symbolic and concrete value. These regions tend to offer the greatest challenges in terms of literacy and schooling for the young and adult population. A third criteria was that the selected city should offer those standards of safety necessary for holding an international event of the importance of CONFINTEA with a hotel network sufficient to offer adequate accommodation to all participants. Equally important was that the city should possess a Convention Centre capable of receiving this type of complex conference. Finally, great weight was given to the local government's commitment to adult and youth education.

The initial nucleus of the local organizing committee was made up of representatives of the UNESCO Brasilia Office – known affectionately as UBO – and of the Secretariat of Continuing Education, Literacy and Diversity (SECAD), the executive division within the Ministry of Education responsible for national adult and youth education policy, who sent a letter to the Mayors of the state capitals of the two regions inviting them to submit bids to hold the conference in May 2009. A total of five bids were received, two from the north region and three from the northeast. Technical visits were then arranged to see the installations in loco and to talk with local government education authorities.

After analysing the five proposals, the city of Belém, capital of the state of Pará, in the heart of the Amazon region was chosen to host the conference. In addition to satisfying the pre-established criteria, the city embodied one of the principal global challenges: how to promote human development based on paradigms of sustainability, in a region where policies of depredation of the natural wealth have been the rule rather than policies which conjugate development and growth with sustainability. And at the same time, how to develop policies of adult learning and education capable of responding to the challenges posed by complex levels of cultural, linguistic, ethnic and environmental diversity.

Having established the host city, a series of agreements were established between the Ministry of Education and the local state government concerning areas of responsibility for the organization of the Conference. Concomitantly, the local (as opposed to international) organizing committee was set up composed, at Federal level, of representatives from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Relations and UBO, and at the state and municipal level by representatives from different areas within the state and municipal governments (education, health, public safety, culture, tourism, transport), by representatives from the public universities (state and federal) and other public organs and civil society organisations. The organizing committee was then divided into seven working groups: ambientalization, ceremonial, communication, culture, logistics, security and

universities, each with its own specific responsibilities but with the common challenge of working together to prepare the infra-structure necessary for holding an international intergovernmental conference.

2. Learning communities and systematization: a marriage of convenience?

According to Coll (2001) there exist four broad categories of Learning Communities which can be classified as:

- Classroom based learning communities.
- School based learning communities.
- Community based learning communities; community learning networks; learning cities, learning towns and learning regions.
- Virtual learning communities.

Torres (2004) argues that the various applications of the Learning Community concept have in common two key terms - learning (face-to-face or distance, school or out-of-school, lifelong) and community (real or virtual)- crossed by premises such as identity, inclusion, dialogue, interaction, communication, collaboration, flexibility, diversity, team. Longworth (1996 apud Coll, 2001), on the other hand, conceptualizes a learning community as "a web of organizations linked together in a common cause – to create a learning environment by learning with and from each other. Within the web may be hospitals, voluntary organizations, theatres, sporting clubs, interest groups, museums as well as companies, schools, colleges and universities", whilst Yarnit (2000 apud Coll, 2001) emphasizes the principles of partnership whereby "A learning community addresses the learning needs of its locality through partnerships."

Messina (2010), in a recent project proposal for learning communities in Mexico, Brazil and Paraguay, lists some of the characteristics which she considers common to most learning communities:

a) They are developed in different environments, without being limited to the school; the learning community can take place both in formal and non-formal education contexts.

b) They are always associated with an explicit task, a Project defined by or with the group.

c) They constitute an interdisciplinary, inter-institutional and inter-sectorial experience, involving both the state (federal and provincial) and civil society. Thus, they can be either an educational or a social and cultural experience.

d) They constitute an intergenerational experience in which everyone learns from each other and for each other.

e) They are aimed at recuperating, developing the potential and respecting the existing diversity, in terms of subjects and knowledge.

f) They promote multiple learnings some of which are foreseeable and others not. In the learning community, one seeks to fulfil a task and at the same time one always learns something else […].

g) They are registered experiences or transformed into reports (oral and/or written, using both non verbal and verbal languages). The narration of the learning community is the path to

learn from the experience; one can learn from any experience, without limiting oneself to successful experiences.

The local organizing committee does not fit exactly into the existing classification as set out by Coll, where it would seem to straddle the categories of virtual learning communities and community based learning communities. The committee due to its composition functioned both virtually and presentially. Although its territorial base was Belém, it formed a community more in the vertical sense of a community of professionals than in the horizontal sense of a defined territorial community. It had a clearly defined task which was not decided by the group but the ways of fulfilling the task and its own organizational structure were determined by the group. At the same time the nature of the pre-established task set limits which could not be extrapolated. The regulations for international inter-governmental conferences, category II,[3] in the UNESCO terminology, establish the broad structure and the rules for participation.

Thus, the local organizing group was very much a learning community in Longworth's use of the concept as "a web of organizations linked together in a common cause". It involved different ministries at the federal level, different state and municipal secretariats with different ideological and political orientations, public universities and the state forum of youth and adult education. Whilst its common cause was organizing the Conference which established a definite time limit for its activities (initially May 2009 until the H1N1 influenza pandemic intervened to cause its postponement until December), the group was concerned with three different learning dimensions of the conference: the four days of the conference itself as an intercultural learning experience for the delegates, the training of students as bilingual monitors for the meeting and the group's own interactions and learning processes during the preparatory process. Whilst the larger group was divided into seven working groups each with its own responsibilities, tasks and coordinators, care was taken to maintain the flux of information between the groups. The working sessions of the group generally started with a plenary, followed by work in groups followed by a final plenary to share information and problems faced by the sub-groups. The majority of the members had no experience in organizing international events of the dimension of a CONFINTEA.

Finally, whilst preoccupation with registering the group process was directed principally at organizational and logistical questions, the very demands of the process became part of the group learning experience. Each group broke down and detailed its activities which then had to be crossed with those of other working groups: logistical needs were clearly a common dimension of nearly groups as were transport and safety. Some groups like security involved extremely complex operations requiring close cooperation between different categories of police and information agencies. All activities were registered on a common spreadsheet with details concerning dates and deadlines, resources required (human and financial), persons responsible, other organizational agencies involved.

This more formal level of systematization of the experience is part of what Jara (2006) describes as taking conscious knowledge of the experience in which one is engaged and of understanding it in order to share with others what one has learnt. Systematization of experience is importantboth for deepening one's understanding of the process and also for drawing out what can be learnt from this

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3   Article 5 of the 2004 edition of UNESCO's manual "Basic Texts" defines the nature of each of the three categories of conference, I, II and III, whilst Article 2 determines the forms of representation at the Conferences (UNESCO, 2004).

and communicating it to others. Although Jara has in general elaborated his theoretical-practical reflections on systematization within the framework of popular education which he defines in the following terms:

> […] 'Popular' education refers to those political–pedagogical processes that seek to overcome relationships of domination, oppression, discrimination, exploitation, inequality and exclusion. Seen from a positive point of view, it refers to all educational processes that seek to build egalitarian and fair relationships that respect diversity and equal rights amongst people (Jara, 2010).

We understand that adult education as it is practiced in Brazil and other parts of Latin America still retains strong links with the popular education paradigm and the influences of Paulo Freire in its concern to contribute to the construction of egalitarian and fair human relationships in different spheres of life. In this sense, we deem that learning processes based on the political-pedagogic framework of popular education are part of a liberating perspective of lifelong learning. It is important to recall that the motto of CONFINTEA VI was "living and learning for a viable future: the power of adult learning". It was in this spirit that the local organizing group faced the challenge of organizing the logistics and infra-structure for the conference.

In the specific case of the organizing group, we suggest that the formal level of systematization was necessary for achieving the concrete objective of the process, organizing the logistics of the international conference with the purpose of guaranteeing the safety, comfort and well-being of the participants whilst providing the physical context for successfully holding the conference. As Jara (2006 : 29) indicates "Systematization is always a means at the service of determined objectives which direct it and give it meaning. That is, in function of a concrete utility which we attribute it in relation with the experiences which we are developing." As we have seen the registering and reporting of experiences is also an inherent instrument for the learning community. This text constitutes an additional level of systematization written by one of the group responsible for coordinating the national effort with a view to contributing to those 'concrete utilities' defined by Jara:

- To reach a deeper understanding of the experiences we develop as a way of improving our own practice;
- To share with other similar practices the lessons learnt from our experience: this is particularly relevant for the organization of future CONFINTEAS and other similar events. Organization is not an end in itself but a means which should be consistent with the contents of the conference and its principle themes;
- To lead to a theoretical reflection on the knowledge created by concrete social practices.
- To repeat what Jara stresses, learning and sharing are two verbs which cannot be separated from the exercise of systematization (2006) and systematization is, at the same time, an inherent attribute of a learning community.

3. In search of coherence between form and content

The organizing group faced a series of challenges which became more clearly defined as the process advanced. The response to these challenges was facilitated by the definition of three guiding

principles which emerged from the group's discussions and activities on how to respond to the uncomfortable mission of conciliating the broad theme of the conference 'adult learning and education' with the motto 'living and learning for a viable future: the power of adult learning', the formal regulations which serve as a guiding framework and the fundamental factor in favour of holding the Conference in Belém, the contribution of adult learning and education to the search for sustainable paradigms of development.

The logic which emerged served to translate these principles into three broad challenges. In response to the desire to seek ways of expressing respect for the culture of sustainability, the group sought to prepare the infra-structure of the conference in such a way as to minimize the possible negative effects on the city's natural environment. Implicit in the principle establishing the need to respect processes of democratic participation and inclusion was the challenge of how to create a dialogue between this and the status of the meeting as an inter-governmental conference. Given the existing regulations on forms of representation, were there means for broadening levels of participation utilizing the new technologies of communication without infringing the rules? And lastly, respect for the indissociability of culture and education was translated into the challenge of creating a dialogue between the cultural programme and the main themes of the conference. These principles and their respective challenges were situated within the overarching objective of characterizing both the organizing process and the conference itself as processes of individual and collective learning.

The question of ambientalization, translated into the culture of sustainability, was one which created most latent resistance. The original proposal had to be diluted in order to achieve acceptance despite arguments that this was an excellent opportunity for questioning existing levels of consumption and waste particularly in the conference setting. The principal objection was that the organization should provide democratic options with regard to consumption rather than impose them. The measures that were adopted were more corrective than innovative. The first involved the development of an efficient system for on-line registration for the conference delegates linked with a solid data base of information. These measures together with the use of other technologies made it possible to reduce the use of paper and postal services. As part of the conference kit, delegates received 'pen-drives' for the storage of documents which could be downloaded via free wi-fi access which the Amazon Convention Centre – Hangar, offered to the participants along with access to desk-top computers located on totems around the centre. An additional component of the kit was a squeeze for water consumption again provided as a means of minimizing the customary mountain of plastic cups accumulated during a four day event in a tropical climate with over a thousand participants. Lastly, the use of individual cars for ministers was substituted by the provision of executive vans to transport heads of delegation to and from the Hangar.

On the symbolic level, the official opening of the conference was marked by the planting of seedlings of native species of trees from the Amazon region in the grounds of the Hangar by the VIPs present. Concomitant to the official planting, three schools in the vicinity which offer programmes of adult education also made their contribution by each planting 10 seedlings.[4] A further measure during the conference was the elaboration of an inventory of the significant emission of greenhouse gases (GGE) in tons of CO_2 considering separately the impacts caused by holding the event in Belém

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4 The three schools - Jarbas Passarinho, President Costa e Silva and Don Pedro I - are part of the state school network.

(transport used for the local shuttles, use of material like paper and plastic, the production of food, the generation and consumption of electricity for illumination, sound equipment and air-conditioning, the use of water and the production of solid wastes) and air transport on national and international routes used by participants at the Conference. To mitigate the former, in March 2010 a further 144 seedlings (based on factors of emission related to the four days of the CONFINTEA) were planted in the Belém Ecological Park in a space which was named as the United Nations Wood. With respect to the latter, the results of air travel were converted into an estimated number of seedlings proportional to the size of each delegation and the number of kilometres covered in order to reach Belém.[5] The national delegations were invited to plant local species of seedling on their return to their home country. This invitation was reinforced at the beginning of 2010 by a letter sent to the head of each delegation. Of the 144 delegations present information was received that Kenya intended to adhere to the proposal. In addition to contributing to mitigate the negative effects of the conference on the local environment, the proposal was situated in the context of the State Government of Para's strategic environmental, social and economic programme entitled 'A billion trees for the Amazon' whose goal was to contribute to reforesting degraded areas of this 1,250,000km2 rainforest state. With regard to the relative failure of these measures, it should be remembered that CONFINTEA was held less than a week before the UN Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen (07/12/2009).

Arguments concerning the elitist nature of the CONFINTEA are not consensual. The CONFINTEA process, in contraposition to the event, involves broad strategies of mobilization and debate. In global terms, UNESCO strongly encouraged member states to base their national report on an active and participative dialogue with all those actors involved – government, private sector and civil society. Five regional preparatory conferences were held in Kenya, South Korea, Mexico, Hungary and Tunisia. In the Brazilian case, state, regional and national meetings were held. Ten delegates from each of the 26 states and the federal district were elected to participate in the regional and national meetings. Hence the question of democratic participation and inclusion was raised not with the intention of criticizing, but as a way of stimulating the search for means by which a greater number of people could accompany the conference discussions and deliberations without contravening the established regulations.

Various strategies were elaborated to attempt to extend the rich learning experience which the Conference represented to a wider public. One of the potentially most effective was the transmission of the four morning sessions on-line to reception points in the State of Pará where the transmission was accompanied by a moderator whose task was to stimulate debate at the end of the session and to any person in Brazil or in any other part of the world with access to internet. Despite the relatively small number of people who made use of this service, messages were received from all over the world from internauts who had accompanied the proceedings via internet. As part of the local component of the on-line transmission, the two public Universities programmed what became known as Extended CONFINTEA. In addition to the daily transmissions, two round-tables were

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5 This data is based on the report prepared by the Brazilian NGO ECOAR, contracted by the Brazilian Government for this end. The three basic factors of emission were consumption of electricity, the generation of waste and its disposal and land transport within the city. In all, 25.54 tons of CO_2 were emitted over the four days of the conference.

organized – on adult education in Latin America and in Portuguese speaking African countries – in which national delegates attending the conference were invited to speak.

Within the Convention Centre, the exhibition area covering over 12,0002 meters was occupied by 70 stands. The objective behind this space was to stimulate an exchange of information and experiences within the broad field of adult learning and education but without the right to commercialize books, materials or other products. Those wishing to mount a stand were requested to submit their proposals by means of a web system developed specifically for that end. Approval was not automatic. Requests were then analyzed by the national coordinating group based on a set of criteria which included the direct link between the proposal and adult learning and education, a balance between different regions of Brazil and between national and international requests as well as between government, third sector and private sector requests. Those proposals which were approved received a standardized stand for which no charge was made.

Although professionals were contracted for some of the functions within the conference structure, a further 210 students (undergraduate and postgraduate) were selected[6] by the Universities, from a total of 419 applicants, to work as bilingual monitors during the days preceding the conference and the event itself. Whilst there was clearly a need for a large contingent of additional staff/helpers to offer services of information and support to delegates, this also constituted an opportunity to extend the benefits of the learning process to the wider community. Thus the students who were selected on the basis of a public call were offered a four month course prior to the conference with the payment of a small grant to cover their expenses. Students came from 41 different undergraduate course – from medicine to economics and from foreign languages to chemical engineering – and four postgraduate courses – neurosciences, economics, linguistics and anthropology - with the basic requirement that they should possess a good command of at least one of the six working languages of UNESCO (English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Russian and Arabic) and availability for the course (on Saturdays) and for the span of the Conference.

The course was conceived with two principal objectives. In keeping with the theme of the CONFINTEA, it aimed at contributing in a lasting way to the formation of this group of students. It was seen as a means of introducing students from diverse fields of study, to important concepts like lifelong learning, youth and adult education and learning, and their potential for changing approaches to development. Large international conferences of this nature tend to be rather predatory in that they take place and leave very little for the community in which they were held. The second objective was to prepare the students for their function within the conference setting by strengthening their linguistic competences and by providing information and discussion on wide themes like international relations, public policy for youth and adult education, the history of the CONFINTEAS, the role of UNESCO and other international agencies, on cultural diversity, critical citizenship, the history of Belém and of the state of Para, in addition to practical topics concerned with accommodation, alimentation, the geography of the city, security, health and the art of receiving foreign visitors. Talks were offered in French, Spanish and English. With the postponement of the Conference in May, the course was eventually extended for a further two months.

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6 Of the 210 students selected, 196 concluded the first phase in May and 188 the final phase after the postponement of the Conference.

During the conference, the students were divided into teams under the responsibility of the seven working groups and based on their demands. They assisted in the reception of delegates at the airport, in the hotels, in the local museums and within the Hangar itself. Their contribution was both real and symbolic. On the one hand, they provided services of information and support to the participants. On the other, they served to remind those present that in many developing countries young people make up a large part of those programmes and projects destined to adults. Hence, the incorporation by many countries of the term youth in their methodological and conceptual discussions, expressed in the notion of Youth and Adult Education and Learning.

The final principle which underlay the organizing process of the conference was that of the indissociability between culture and education based on an understanding of events of this nature as learning processes. The internal and external cultural programmes were planned with several objectives. Firstly, to express the rich historical and cultural diversity of this multi-ethnic region. They were also elaborated as a means of interacting with the city and reinforcing the theme of democratic participation. Thirdly, the cultural programme provided the space in which to create a dialogue between popular and erudite culture and between different cultural languages – music, dance, folklore, poetry, theatre. Finally, the cultural programme sought to establish a dialogue with the thematic debates which took place during the conference on lifelong learning and education as an integral and undeniable component of the process of human and social development understood as a process of liberation.

Internally, the cultural presentations occupied temporal and spatial dimensions integrated in the common geography and chronology of the convention centre. They took place at the beginning of the day, during coffee and tea breaks and at the end of the day and occupied the stairs, the restaurant, the main auditorium, the halls, the entrance and exit. They were designed to create an environment in which the participants felt comfortable and welcome, questioned and challenged, surprised and intrigued: a cultural dialogue between what is universal and particular to different cultural expressions.

Externally, the city opened the doors of its historical, cultural and religious archives and heritage by extending opening times so as to facilitate visits by delegates after conference hours. Delegates also received a passport which allowed free access to the Mangal das Garças ecological park (the Heron Mangroves). In this way it was hoped that delegates would be led to comprehend the challenges faced by states like Para when seeking to provide educational responses to the demands posed by this vast bio- and cultural diversity within the search for new parameters of social and economic sustainable development – harnessing the power and potential of adult learning and education for a viable future. The final event of the programme which provided a fitting conclusion to the conference was what was entitled as the Procession of Cultural Diversity, in which almost a thousand artists from the city and neighbouring regions paraded though the Old City accompanied, intermingled and surrounded by delegates and local inhabitants.

4. CONFINTEA: learning to organise for a viable future

CONFINTEAS are rarely evaluated on the basis of the consistency between the political agenda and the way in which the conference is structured. In general what is expected is an analysis of the political outcome of the Conference. Little importance is attached to internal consistency between content and form. At the same time, it would appear that there is little emphasis on evaluation. After six International Conferences on Adult Education held over the last 60 years, using similar formats, it would perhaps be relevant to submit the CONFINTEA process and event to a more rigorous evaluation. The employment of new technologies of information and communication has been little studied. The question of whether the end results justify the cost in human and financial terms of the process and event is one which requires a qualified answer.

For the local organizing group, the challenges were manifold. Forming a cohesive group composed of representatives from government and civil society, and from diverse administrative units required patience and practice. Changes in the occupants of key executive posts followed by the reorganization of support teams, involved realignments and flexibility. However, the underlying strength of the process was the commitment of the team to the established task and its ability to learn from experience and to seek information and build partnerships with entities not represented in the group when necessary. Whilst each working group enjoyed relative autonomy the sharing of information and the necessary integration between the groups was apparent. This new learning has already been employed by several integrants of the group in the organization of other events. At the same time, participation in the organizing group contributed to strengthening the self-esteem and confidence of its members. The holding of the Conference in a city in the northern region of the country had been questioned and criticized from the outset. It was important for the group to correspond to the task whilst organizing an event which whilst satisfying the demands of quality associated with an International Conference also incorporated the wealth of its own cultural diversity and hospitality.

The organizing group's capacity to learn and share and to systematize that process was central to the successful completion of the immediate task. This same spirit of sharing and learning drove the group to attempt to extend the experience to the larger geographical community, the virtual community, to the university community and to the small army of bilingual monitors. Whilst the coming months will demonstrate the world community's political will to implement and monitor the commitments and recommendations contained in the Belém Framework for Action, much too can be learnt from the spirit in which the Conference was organized and from the recognition that the adoption of lifelong learning as the underlying principle for all learning processes requires constant revision of our practices and of their contribution to the construction of socially, economically, culturally and environmentally sustainable strategies of development which seek, in Jara's words, "to build egalitarian and fair relationships that respect diversity and equal rights amongst people" (2010).

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