

“This is the Authors’ Original Manuscript of an article published by Routledge Taylor & Francis Group in [International Journal of Lifelong Education] on [First published online: 30-May-2018], available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2018.1478458>”

Adult Education as a Common Good: Conceptualization and Measurement

Pepka Boyadjieva

Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

1000 Sofia, 13A Moskovska str., Bulgaria

Tel: „00359“ – „899 751 574“

E-mail: pepka7@gmail.com

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0561-6942>

Petya Ilieva-Trichkova¹

Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

1000 Sofia, 13A Moskovska str., Bulgaria

Tel: „00359“ – „898 907 529“

E-mail: petya.ilievat@gmail.com

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2889-0047>

Abstract

The article outlines a theoretical framework for conceptualising adult education – and more broadly, lifelong learning – as a common good. It argues that the extent to which adult education as a common

¹ Equal authors, the names are listed in an alphabetical order.

Corresponding author: Petya Ilieva-Trichkova, Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge, 13A Moskovska str., 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria. Email: petya.ilievat@gmail.com

good is accomplished in a given society/country reflects its accessibility, availability, affordability, and the social commitment to its functioning, and that it depends on a country's specific institutional arrangements. Building on this conceptualization and using data from the Adult Education Survey, the Labour Force Survey and the Continuing Vocational Training Survey for 24 European countries, the authors develop a composite index, based on these four dimensions, which measures the extent to which adult education as a common good is practiced in a given country. This index can be used to assess the effectiveness of national policies in the sphere of adult education across Europe. The results indicate substantial cross-country differences in the extent to which adult education as a common good is realised, with North European states scoring best and Romania scoring worst. Finally, applying cluster analysis, the article identifies six distinctive clusters of countries with regard to the extent of adult education as a common good; the authors designate these cluster categories as reality, feasible, ambiguous, problematic, possible and invisible.

Adult Education as a Common Good: Conceptualization and Measurement

Introduction

Recently, important structural factors (demographic decline and changes in the labour market) have considerably increased the demand for adult education and enhanced its role for social development (Cedefop, 2010; European Commission, 2013). Taking into account these tendencies, the European agenda for adult learning sets the goal to “enhance the possibilities for adults, regardless of gender and their personal and family circumstances, to access high-quality learning opportunities at any time in their lives, in order to promote personal and professional development, empowerment, adaptability, employability and active participation in society” (European Commission, 2011, p. 3). This goal clearly reflects the idea that adult education should be available to all people, implying that it is regarded as a public good. However, all studies of participation in adult education reveal that it is determined by several factors and that “the adults most in need of education and training are those with the least access to lifelong learning opportunities: adults with low level or no qualifications, those in low-skilled occupations, the unemployed and economically inactive, older people and the least skilled” (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, p. 8). In addition, data show that less public than private resources are invested in training and that the “role of the state is less than that of companies and families” (European Commission, 2013, pp. 10-14, 63). The trend towards privatisation of adult education is clearly evident in all countries. Such tendencies provide conflicting arguments as to whether adult education is a private, public or common good. In fact, a few studies explore formal education as a common good, such as the research by Rita Locatelli (2016) on schooling and these of Simon Marginson (2016) and Krystian Szadkowski (unpublished) on the case of higher education. However, to the best of our knowledge, no available research is focused on adult education.

Against this background, the article aims: 1) To outline a theoretical framework for conceptualising adult education – and more broadly, lifelong learning – as a common good; 2) To develop an index for measuring the extent to which adult education as a common good is accomplished in a given country; 3) To show whether countries fall into distinct clusters with regard to the extent of practice of adult education as a common good.

Conceptual considerations

“Common goods”, “public goods” and “*the common good*” are concepts widely discussed in philosophy, economics and political science. Recently they have attracted the attention of scholars in sociology and educational science as well.

A specific approach to conceptualising private goods, public goods and common goods is provided by *neo-classical economics*. Based on two criteria – excludability and rivalry – economists distinguish three types of goods: private, public and common. Unlike private goods, public goods are non-excludable and non-rivalrous, i.e. individuals cannot be excluded from the use and benefits of these particular goods, and their use by one individual does not reduce their availability to others. A good is non-rivalrous if one person’s consumption of the good does not reduce the benefits someone else obtains from its consumption (Samuelson, 1954; Cowen, 2007; Deneulin & Townsend, 2007). A common good is non-excludable but rivalrous (Marginson, 2016, p. 83). This means that all individuals should have access to a given good of this kind, but its use by one individual reduces the scope of possibilities for others.

Studies in *philosophy and political science* have followed varying theoretical traditions. They introduce closely related notions such as “the common good”, “common goods”, “commons”, “public goods” and “collective goods”, offering diverse conceptualisations of each one of them. It is acknowledged that “*the common good*” is a

normative concept with a long and contested history and that it is closely related to “public goods” and “the public interest” (Pusser, 2006; Etzioni, 2015; Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2017). The tradition of philosophical study of the common good dates back to Plato and Aristotle. The concept was further developed in the works of numerous philosophers and political theorists, including Thomas Aquinas, Niccolò Machiavelli, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, Jacques Maritain, John Rawls, etc. Although there are significant differences in how the common good is conceptualised in the various philosophical and political doctrines, it is generally viewed as a norm which unifies a given (political) community.

The discussion on common goods has received a new impetus around the notion of *commons* which has gained importance as a result of several ecological challenges arising from the growth of industry, cities and population. It is acknowledged that “since Garrett Hardin’s challenging article in *Science* (1968), the expression ‘the tragedy of the commons’ has come to symbolise the degradation of the environment to be expected whenever many individuals use a scarce resource in common” (Ostrom, 1990, p. 2). The commons’ paradigm “emerged from the crisis of the State and modernism as pillars of development” and “proposed making communities the main players in their own development” (Locher, 2016, p. 327). “The tragedy of the commons” has brought to the fore the question of how best to govern natural resources used by many individuals in common, and the idea that community governance of resources is an effective vector for development that could counterbalance – or even replace – state intervention and privatisation (Ostrom, 1990; Locher, 2016). Rita Locatelli (2016, p. 154) underlines that “despite the high degree of ‘flexibility’, the term common goods holds a minimum semantic core that can be traced as common in all socio-political claims” and quotes Lorenzo Coccoli who summarises the main characteristics forming this minimum semantic core as follows: “(1) the opposition of the concept of

common goods to the processes of privatisation and marketisation, and more generally to the dynamics of neoliberalism; (2) the re-composition of networks of social solidarity within communities, and (3) the development of instruments of participatory democracy”. Indeed, all discussions on common goods refer to what is shared and beneficial for all, or most, members of a given community, or to what could be produced by collective actions and active participation in the public and political sphere; thus, common goods include both goods that serve no particular group and those that will serve members of the yet unborn generations. Although closely related to the notion of public goods, the idea of common goods has its own specific meaning¹.

A forthcoming paper makes an attempt to systematise and categorise the use of the various modes of the concepts of the common - the common good, the commons (plural), and the common (singular) – in contrast with the concepts of the public in higher education research (Szadkowski, unpublished). In so doing, the study in question discusses how six aspects of higher education reality - funding, governance, property relations, the benefits from, and ontology of, higher education, and politics - would appear/differ if based on each of these three concepts.

We share the view that the concept of common goods allows us to go beyond the limits of the concept of public goods (UNESCO, 2015) and provides new perspectives for rethinking education. Below we highlight certain theoretical ideas in order to outline a conceptual framework for understanding adult education as a common good².

Common goods refer to basic needs of human beings. The idea of common goods derives from the basic need of all human beings for mutual assistance. In Adam Smith’s words (2004, p. 100), “[a]ll the members of human society stand in need of each other’s assistance, and are likewise exposed to mutual injuries. . . Society may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual

love or affection. . . Society, however, cannot subsist among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another”. Recently, Simon Marginson (2016, p. 29) has also argued that “the notion of the common good is a denial that society is and should be composed of atomized individuals living in isolation from one another”.

Common goods, individual freedom and individual rights. A crucial question in discussions on common goods is how these relate to individual freedom. The experience of totalitarian societies shows there is a tension between the dignity of the person and the practical demands of the common goods. It is well known that, in the name of the common goods, totalitarian societies subordinate the individual to the state. On the other hand, as a rule, capitalist societies emphasise the autonomy of the individual versus the demands of the state. As Andrew Yuengert argues (2001, p. 4), “in this case the common good is a necessary antidote to the centrifugal forces set in motion by radical individualism”. Following Jacques Maritain, it is worth asserting that society exists for the person and the person exists for society in a way that maintains the dignity of free persons. From such a perspective, the common good presupposes persons and flows back upon them; it must be good for everyone, and cannot involve tradeoffs of one person’s good for another’s (Maritain, 1985)³.

Common goods and private goods. Common goods are not a sum of private goods. They are “not simply a means for attaining the private good of individuals” (Hollenbach, 2002, pp. 81-2), but have their own value. That is why, from a “common good” perspective, it is not only the “good life” of individuals that matters, but also the goodness of the life that humans hold in common (Deneulin & Townsend, 2007, p. 24).

Common goods and shared actions. Common goods require shared actions. The “shared action is intrinsic, as well as instrumental, to the good itself, and its benefits come in the course of that shared action” (Deneulin & Townsend, 2007, p. 26). According to Jacques Maritain, the common good is constituted by goods that humans share intrinsically in

common and communicate to each other, such as values, civil virtues and a sense of justice (Maritain, 1946).

Common goods are socially embedded. Different communities may have different understandings of the common good/common goods. That is why the common goods can only be defined within diverse contexts and conceptions of well-being and common life (Deneulin & Townsend, 2007; UNESCO, 2015, p. 78).

Taking into account the above theoretical considerations, our discussion of adult education as a common good will be guided and organised according to two important perspectives. First, as shown above, the philosophical tradition in the study of the common good refers to both “*the* common good” and “*a* common good” or “common goods”. In the following analysis, in attempting to combine ideas from philosophical discussions on common goods with its understanding in neo-classical economics, we will try to ascertain whether adult education could be regarded as *a* common good. Second, we differentiate between two perspectives that, although closely connected, delineate two distinct relations between adult education and the three types of goods (private, public and common). The first perspective explores whether, and to what extent, adult education itself is implemented, and can be defined, as a private, public or common good. The second one tries to reveal what kind of private, public and common goods are produced by adult education⁴. In this article, we adhere to the first analytical approach.

The discussion of possibilities for understanding adult education as a common good outlines new and fruitful perspectives for rethinking and reimagining the essence of adult education and its role in contemporary societies. While “within a public good approach the point of view remains essentially focused on public institutions that should provide the regulatory framework for the development of democratic educational systems, considering education as a common good implies that education is a collective shared endeavor, both in its

production and in its benefits” (Locatelli, 2016, p. 158). A common good perspective is especially suitable for studying adult education as it corresponds to the specificity of this form of education. Adult education and adult learning are the most important forms of lifelong learning. They include different kinds of knowledge and skills (institutionalised and informal, organised and sporadic, purposeful and unintended) in different perspectives (of the individual and social; of employment and citizenship; of leisure and work), within diverse, public and private, settings. In addition, they involve a wide range of actors (public and private institutions, NGOs, civic and religious organisations) acting at different levels. At first glance, it seems that adult education is mainly a private good and cannot be viewed as a common good. Taking into account Simon Marginson’s discussion on higher education (2007; 2011) we accept that adult education is intrinsically neither a private, nor a public - or common - good. It is potentially rivalrous or non-rivalrous, and potentially excludable or non-excludable, which means that, being nested in the wider social and cultural settings, adult education as a good is policy sensitive and, consequently, varies by time and place.

Defining adult education as a common good implies acknowledging that it is indispensable for human well-being in contemporary societies. If we accept Amartya Sen’s definition of human well-being as the freedoms that people have reason to choose and value (Sen, 1999), or Martha Nussbaum’s list of central human capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011), it is beyond doubt that human well-being in modern dynamic and liquid societies (Bauman, 2000) would not be possible without the development of adult education as a common good. Adult education as a common good presupposes, and requires, that it develop as an inclusive process shared by, and beneficial to, all or most members of a given community/society. Viewing adult education as a common good means that it unfolds in mutual social relationships, in and through which human beings enhance their well-being; it is therefore a kind of collective endeavor in which are involved different and diverse social institutions.

Adult education is a common good in and for a given community/society providing it “is immanent within the relationships that bring this community or society into being” (Hollenbach, 2002, p. 9). This understanding of adult education emphasises its complex nature and the plurality of its roles and values, which go beyond its instrumental function, and acknowledges its empowering and transformative mission as well (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018). Thus, adult education as a common good is closely related to concepts such as justice, rights (Walker & Boni, 2013), solidarity and equality (Marginson, 2016). Access to adult education is the element of the adult education system that is most soaked in politics, for in many countries, the state sets standards for accreditation of institutions providing adult education, regulates the number of available places, provides financial incentives for adults returning to education, etc. That is why we argue that *the extent to which adult education is accomplished as a common good in a given society/country reflects its accessibility, availability, affordability, and the commitment of society to this education*. Adult education is a common good when it is accessible to a growing number of people and when policies have been implemented to reduce inequalities in, and barriers to, its access. *The realisation of adult education as a common good depends on the country’s specific institutional arrangements*.

Methodology

Data

The empirical basis of our study are macro level data drawn mainly from the Adult Education Survey (2011). This survey, conducted via random sampling procedure, targets people aged 25 to 64 years who live in private households; it is part of the European Union (EU) statistics on lifelong learning and collects primary data on participation in education and training. The survey takes place every 5 years. However, the micro data from the Adult Education Survey

2016 are not yet available. The survey allows us to adopt a wide comparative perspective, as it was conducted in many European countries. The number of these countries in the Adult Education Survey 2011 was 30. These data are complemented by data from the Labour Force Survey (2011) and the Continuing Vocational Training Survey (2010), which have been extracted from the Eurostat website.

Index calculation

We introduce an index to capture the extent to which adult education has been realised as a common good in a given country. The index includes four sets of indicators, referring to *accessibility, availability, affordability* and *social commitment* to adult education.

Accessibility of adult education refers to the ability of people from all backgrounds to access and benefit from adult education on a reasonably equal basis (for higher education see Usher & Medow, 2010, p. 1). It is measured through indicators such as:

1) Participation rates: Participation rate in formal and non-formal education and training [trng_aes_102]

2) Adult education equity index (AEEI):

$$AEEI = 100 \times \frac{\text{(share of people aged 25-64 with a higher educational degree)}}{\text{(share of people aged 25-64 with higher education who participated in adult education)}}$$

Using the Educational Equity Index (see Usher, 2004; Usher & Medow, 2010) designed for higher education, we have constructed such an index for adult education. This index measures the level of equity in adult education. It ranges from 0 to 100, where 0 means absolutely no equity in adult education and 100 corresponds to complete equity at country level.

Availability of adult education relates to resources (both institutional and individual) which are suitable for adult education and enable people's participation in it. It is captured by means of:

3) Distance to place of education: % of people who have not reported "Training took place at a distance hard to reach" as an obstacle to participation in lifelong learning;

4) Distance learning: % of people who reported distance learning using online or offline computer and/or distance learning using traditional teaching material for the most recent formal activity and for the three non-formal activities, out of the total number of people who participated in formal and non-formal education and training;

5) Suitable offers: % of people who have not marked "No suitable education or training activity (offer)" as an obstacle to participation in lifelong learning;

6) Access to information: % of adults who reported they had access to information on learning possibilities [trng_aes_182];

7) IT equipment: % of adults who have not reported "No access to a computer or internet for distance learning" as an obstacle to participation in lifelong learning;

Affordability of adult education captures the cost of adult education in relation to people's financial means and the support they receive to overcome obstacles to participation in adult education. It is measured with:

8) Enterprise expenditure on CVT courses: Cost of CVT courses as % of total labour cost (all enterprises) [trng_cvts16];

9) Acceptable cost of education: The extent to which a person's participation in adult education is not hampered by lack of financial resources. It is measured with: Percentage of adults who have not reported „Training was too expensive/Cost was difficult to afford" as an obstacle to participation in lifelong learning.

10) Employer's support: Percentage of adults who have not reported the "Lack of employer's support" as an obstacle to participation in lifelong learning.

Social commitment to adult education refers to the engagement of various actors (public, private, institutions of civil society, religious organisations) in the provision and funding of adult education. It is measured with:

11) the percentage of those who have partial or full payment for the first randomly selected non-formal education and training activity during the last 12 months paid by employer or prospective employer, public employment services or other public institutions.

12) the percentage of those who reported institutions other than formal education and non-formal education and training institutions as being providers of the first randomly selected non-formal education and training activity during the last 12 months.

Some of our indicators are based on objective data, and some, on subjective. We think that both types of indicators should be taken into account when assessing whether adult education is or is not realised as a common good in a given country.

For the calculation of the index, we have followed the methodology used in the report “*Don’t Panic: Findings of the European Catch-Up Index 2015*” (Lessenski, 2016), prepared by the Open Society Institute - Sofia. This methodology has been chosen for two main reasons. First, it offers very clear guidelines for all statistical procedures. Second, it allows exploring the dynamics of the indexes over time as a next step of the analysis. More specifically, we standardised the values of different indicators described above according to a statistical procedure which recalculates them on one and the same scale while simultaneously preserving the order and proportions between them. The standardising was done following the normalization method of z-scores, which uses mean weighed score and standard deviation. Using this procedure, the distribution of the values in the countries for each of the indicators was translated and the mean 0 and dispersion 1 were calculated, while the order and proportions between the values for the different countries were preserved. Then we

transformed the standardised values into scores ranging from 0 to 100. Values smaller than 0 and bigger than 100 (“extreme values”) received scores 0 and 100, respectively.

Each of the four dimensions – accessibility, availability, affordability and social commitment - contains different numbers of basic indicators. We assign equal importance to each one of the four dimensions. The level of importance of each indicator within a given dimension is calculated by dividing the overall weight of the dimension by the number of indicators. For the sake of transparency, we are prepared to send the indicators themselves on request so that users can use weights other than the ones proposed in the article. The weights are provided in Table 1.

[**Table 1.** Categories/indicators and weights, near here]

After the weighting, we constructed the composite index of adult education as a common good, where the index comprises all four categories; we then calculated it for 24 countries. This was the number of countries for which we found information regarding the indicators of interest. Each of the four basic dimensions is equal in importance for the composite index of adult education as a common good. The index ranges between 0 and 100, where a value of 0 means that adult education is not at all realised as a common good in a given country, and a value of 100 means that adult education is realised to the greatest extent as a common good in a given country. The same interpretation refers to all four dimensions: adult education’s accessibility, availability, affordability, and social commitment to adult education.

Cluster analysis

After calculating the overall index scores and the scores in each dimension, we applied cluster analysis. In general, this type of analysis consists in a collection of algorithms used to classify objects such as countries, species, and individuals in order to reduce the dimensionality of a data set by exploiting the similarities/dissimilarities between cases (OECD, 2008). In this case, the cluster analysis was made with regard to the categories comprising the overall score of the index of adult education as a common good. More specifically, agglomerative hierarchical cluster analysis of the Complete Linkage (the furthest neighbour) with the help of the Stata 14 statistical package was used to discover the number of clusters of countries. This type of analysis tends to produce very compact clusters, where each member of a cluster must be close to every other member of the same cluster (Kaufman & Rousseeuw, 2015). The similarity of cases was measured using the standard Euclidean distance between them. Having in mind that cluster solutions are sensitive to the specific clustering algorithm used (Kantardzic, 2011; Xu & Wunsch, 2009), we also employed another hierarchical clustering algorithm, i.e., the Ward Linkage (the nearest neighbour). The results of the second algorithm were consistent with results produced using the first algorithm.

Results

Table 2 shows the overall index scores and the respective country rank for adult education as a common good. The countries are sorted according to their overall index score.

[**Table 2.** Index of adult education as a common good (overall score and rank) for 24 countries, near here]

Table 2 highlights the significant differences between countries with regard to the extent to which adult education as a common good has been accomplished, with the North European countries scoring best, and Romania, worst. Specifically, the country with the highest overall index score is Luxembourg followed by Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway and the Netherlands: this means that adult education as a common good has been realised to the greatest extent in these countries. However, as of 2011 it seems that in none of the countries studied has adult education as a common good been practiced completely. In most of the countries, substantial developments are accompanied by problems in reaching this goal. These countries include Norway, France, Belgium, Slovakia, Spain, Austria, Malta, Cyprus, Hungary, Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Estonia. Countries at the bottom of the table – Italy, Latvia, Greece, Lithuania and Poland – have a long way to go before adult education becomes accessible, available and affordable for most citizens. Romania is a country that definitely is far from realising adult education as a common good. It is important to emphasise that in calculating the index, we have assigned equal weight to all four dimensions distinguished for adult education as a common good. However, depending on the theoretical considerations or the policy purposes, researchers or policy makers may prefer different weights. In order to facilitate further use and transparency of the index we present the indexes for each of the dimensions of adult education as a common good in Table 3.

[Table 3. Indexes for adult education’s accessibility, availability and affordability and social commitment to adult education (score and rank) for 24 countries, near here]

Table 3 demonstrates that differences also occur between the country ranks depending on the four dimensions of adult education as a common good. For example, Denmark, which occupies the third place according to its overall score, ranks fifth on accessibility, first on

availability, fifteenth on affordability and fourth on social commitment. These differences indicate that adult education as a common good is a complex phenomenon and that in this respect, problematic aspects appear in all countries, which should be improved upon. The results also show that the four dimensions of the index of adult education as a common good have different differentiating power. Thus, the countries differ considerably in relation to accessibility – the two highest scores being 84.63 and 83.47, and the two lowest, 18.24 and 6.7. The differences between countries in relation to availability of adult education, however, are not so pronounced – the two highest scores are 73.21 and 68.8, and the two lowest, 41.16 and 23.43.

In order to deepen our analysis, at a next step we carried out cluster analysis of the four dimensions of the common good, thereby trying to capture similarities and differences between countries in relation to the way the dimensions interact in each country. The algorithm of the cluster analysis used allowed us to identify six distinctive groups of countries based on their overall score. We have given the characteristics of each cluster in Table 4. More specifically, this table provides an overview of the intersection between the levels of the four dimensions of adult education as a common good as these have emerged from the cluster analysis.

[**Table 4.** Typology of countries based on the extent to which adult education has been realised as a common good, near here]

In Table 4, we have arranged these clusters in an order showing the extent to which they represent different levels of realization of adult education as a common good. We have designated the six distinctive clusters as 1) *reality*, 2) *feasible*, 3) *ambiguous*, 4) *problematic*, 5) *possible* and 6) *invisible*. The *reality* cluster of adult education is formed by Northern

European countries: Denmark, Luxembourg, Finland and Sweden. The largest cluster of countries is that in which adult education as a common good is *feasible*; it includes Germany, Estonia, Spain, France, Cyprus, Hungary, the Netherlands, Austria and Norway. The countries in which adult education as a common good is *possible* are the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland and Slovenia. The next cluster refers to countries in which realization of adult education as a common good is *ambiguous* - Belgium, Malta and Slovakia. The last two clusters include countries that are far from achieving adult education as a common good. The *problematic* one is formed by two Mediterranean countries, Italy and Greece, and one post-Communist country, Latvia. The *impossible* cluster is comprised of only one country, Romania.

Discussion of the results

The results presented above suggest that there are six distinct clusters of countries in Europe with regard to the extent to which adult education is realised as a common good. In a recent study, Eve-Liis Roosmaa and Ellu Saar (2017) theoretically distinguish seven adult-learning country types, which correspond to the typology of countries based on varieties of capitalism, welfare state regimes and their extensions. The types are: liberal, social democratic, conservative/continental, Southern Europe, post-Socialist neoliberal, post-Socialist embedded neoliberal, post-Socialist Balkan. Their study and ours capture different aspects of adult education. Eve-Liis Roosmaa and Ellu Saar focus mainly on its accessibility, captured in terms of level of participation and inequality in participation, whereas we add indicators on the availability and affordability of adult education, and on social commitment to it. Also, the overlap of countries between the two studies is not full. These differences explain to a certain extent why both similarities and differences are to be seen between our analysis and the typology proposed by Eve-Liis Roosmaa and Ellu Saar. Thus, for instance, Estonia displays

more features of a Northern or a Western European country than its neighbors Latvia and Lithuania. Another example refers to the observed heterogeneity within the Visegrad countries with regard to the realisation of adult education as a common good there. Using sets of demographic and socioeconomic variables, Peter Robert (2012) has identified, respectively, four and three clusters of countries, which also seem to differ from the mainstream lifelong learning typologies.

Our results raise the question as to the explanatory power of the typology of welfare regimes in international comparative studies of adult education. This question is in line with existing critiques of the use of typologies in lifelong learning research. On the one hand, some criticisms refer to the limitations of working with country-level variables, given that governance is also located at regional and transnational levels (Riddell & Weedon, 2012). On the other hand, some of these typologies have been constructed without statistical testing or validation (Boeren, 2016). Our typology of countries based on the extent to which adult education has been realised as a common good does not correspond fully to the typology of countries based on their specific variety of capitalism and welfare state regime; this fact suggests that additional dimensions of cross-country differences that are not captured by the second typology (for example, cultural dimensions) should be taken into account in order to better explain the development of adult education in different countries. It is also worth discussing whether adult education as a common good would be better understood by combining macro and meso levels of analysis.

Finally, our findings chime with recent challenges to make lifelong learning a reality, which is one of the goals of the Strategic Framework “Education and Training 2020”. More specifically, our findings highlight that this challenge cannot be reduced only to boosting the participation rate in adult education, but also requires a much wider vision of how this type of education can become a common good.

We see several directions for future research within two broad perspectives. The first is related to further deepening the conceptualisation of adult education as a common good. We agree with Rita Locatelli (2016, p. 153) that the apparent vagueness of the definition of concepts such as common goods, “which may be seen as a limit, constitutes in reality their strength”, and that “common goods exemplify what Lévi-Strauss called ‘significant flottant’, the meaning of which, although imprecise, enables a concept to function as a point of attraction of different meanings”. However, in order to grasp these different meanings important topics at theoretical level need to be comprehensively addressed, for example: public interests and adult education as a common good; the public-private divide in the provision of adult education and adult education as a common good; adult education as a common good and governance in adult education, etc. It is also worth analysing how adult education itself contributes to achieving other common goods. For instance, Melanie Walker and Monica Mclean (2013) focus on how university-based professional education in South Africa might contribute to the public good of poverty-reduction and thus, to achieving more justice and less inequality. So far, the contribution of adult education to the common goods has not been explored.

The second perspective points to different directions for developing a methodology for exploring the dynamics of how adult education unfolds as a common good in specific national contexts over time. The set of indicators used to measure adult education as a common good needs to be enriched both with subjective and objective indicators and with indicators capturing the qualitative aspects of adult education. It is also important to widen the range of countries studied. Special attention should be focused on how different factors (for example, the country’s specific institutional arrangements) influence the extent to which adult education functions as a common good.

Conclusion

The present article contains both theoretical and methodological contributions. At theoretical level, it outlines a theoretical framework for conceptualising adult education as a common good. Evident signs of dismantling of the welfare state model and the accelerated processes of privatisation in the sphere of education put to the fore the need to rethink the nature of all forms of education. A common-good perspective provides grounds for a humanistic approach to adult education, centered around the issues of accessibility and inclusion, and promotes the values of solidarity and justice in the educational sphere and its governance. More specifically, our analysis demonstrates that the extent to which adult education is as a common good is accomplished in a given society/country reflects the accessibility, availability, affordability of, and social commitment to, adult education. At methodological level, the article involves the designing of an index for measuring adult education as a common good, an index allowing countries to be ranked according to the extent to which adult education as a common good has been realized in them.

The article also has clear political implications as it provides theoretical conceptualisations and develops a methodological instrument – an index of adult education as a common good – for assessing the effectiveness of national policies in the sphere of adult education across Europe. The new global Education 2030 Agenda has adopted a perspective based on lifelong learning. Adult education could substantially contribute to the Education 2030 Agenda (Milana et al., 2017) only if it is understood, governed and practiced, from a humanistic perspective that takes into account both individual and public interests, and that calls for the pursuit of common goods.

Notes

1. For a discussion on similarities and differences between public good and common good, see Deneulin & Townsend, 2007, p. 32.
2. In the discussion on common goods, we refer to contemporary societies which, to various degrees, adhere to the principles of democracy and market economy.
3. Jacques Maritain (1985, p. 52) defines the common good as “sociological integration of all the civic conscience, political virtues and sense of right and liberty, of all the activity, material prosperity and spiritual riches, of unconsciously operative hereditary wisdom, of moral rectitude, justice, friendship, happiness, virtue and heroism in the individual lives of its members”.
4. See, for example, Simon Marginson’s discussion (2016) on the public goods that higher education produces and how it can contribute to the common good, and Ellen Hazelkorn and Andrew Gibson’s discussion (2017) on how higher education serves the public good.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this article. The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the projects: “*Encouraging Lifelong Learning for an Inclusive and Vibrant Europe—ENLIVEN*” (2016-2019) funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under Grant Agreement No. 693989 and “*Social inequalities in education, human capital and opportunities for individual development: theoretical and methodological aspects*” funded by the Programme for support of young researchers and doctoral students – 2017, grant number 17-173 / 03.08.2017. This article uses data from Eurostat, Adult Education Survey, 2011 obtained for the needs of Research Project Proposal 124/2016-LFS-AES-CVTS-CSIS. The responsibility for all conclusions drawn from the data lies entirely with the authors.

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Table 1. Categories/indicators and weights

Categories/indicators	Weight of the dimension	Weight of the indicator
<i>Accessibility</i>	25.00%	
• Participation rate		12.50%
• AEEI		12.50%
<i>Availability</i>	25.00%	
• Distance to place of education		5.00%
• Distance learning		5.00%
• Suitable offers		5.00%
• Access to information		5.00%
• IT equipment		6.67%
<i>Affordability</i>	25.00%	
• Enterprise expenditure on CVT courses		8.33%
• Acceptable cost of education		8.33%
• Employer's support		8.33%
<i>Social commitment</i>	25.00%	
• Engagement of various institutions with payment		12.50%
• Engagement of various institutions with provision		12.50%

Table 2. Index of adult education as a common good (overall score and rank) for 24 countries

Country	Overall score	Rank Overall score
Luxembourg	59.93	1
Sweden	58.57	2
Denmark	56.57	3
Finland	52.24	4
Norway	50.87	5
Netherlands	50.74	6
Spain	48.88	7
Belgium	48.87	8
Hungary	48.13	9
France	47.78	10
Slovakia	46.11	11
Cyprus	45.81	12
Malta	44.86	13
Austria	44.54	14
Germany	44.52	15
Estonia	42.64	16
Czech Republic	41.80	17
Slovenia	39.61	18
Italy	39.19	19
Latvia	34.68	20
Greece	34.07	21
Lithuania	32.27	22
Poland	29.24	23
Romania	15.16	24

Table 3. Indexes for adult education’s accessibility, availability and affordability and social commitment to adult education (score and rank) for 24 countries

Country	Accessibility Score (Rank)	Availability Score (Rank)	Affordability Score (Rank)	Social commitment Score (Rank)
Luxembourg	84.67 (1)	68.8 (2)	54.02 (10)	32.21 (8)
Sweden	83.47 (2)	60.7 (4)	53.35 (11)	36.76 (2)
Denmark	68.62 (5)	73.21 (1)	49.54 (15)	34.91 (4)
Finland	73.37 (3)	63.52 (3)	46.35 (17)	25.72 (14)
Norway	66.82 (6)	48.01 (13)	52.74 (12)	35.90 (3)
Netherlands	70.11 (4)	54.24 (7)	50.16 (14)	28.44 (10)
Spain	50.51 (13)	55.93 (6)	55.62 (8)	33.45 (5)
Belgium	45.52 (15)	46.27 (18)	71.85 (1)	31.84 (9)
Hungary	51.96 (11)	43.27 (22)	59.04 (5)	38.24 (1)
France	58.54 (8)	49.02 (11)	57.14 (6)	26.43 (12)
Slovakia	37.53 (18)	58.23 (5)	67.49 (3)	21.20 (17)
Cyprus	50.97 (12)	45.82 (19)	59.16 (4)	27.31 (11)
Malta	36.0 (19)	49.32 (10)	71.01 (2)	23.09 (15)
Austria	56.72 (10)	43.88 (20)	56.44 (7)	21.11 (18)
Germany	56.98 (9)	48.57 (12)	46.33 (18)	26.21 (13)
Estonia	60.19 (7)	46.82 (16)	41.58 (20)	21.97 (16)
Czech Republic	44.46 (16)	52.84 (9)	52.42 (13)	17.49 (20)
Slovenia	47.9 (14)	46.43 (17)	55.38 (9)	8.72 (22)
Italy	38.3 (17)	43.62 (21)	41.45 (21)	33.39 (6)
Latvia	35.63 (20)	47.09 (14)	36.41 (22)	19.59 (19)
Greece	18.24 (23)	53.91 (8)	30.81 (23)	33.32 (7)
Lithuania	32.56 (21)	41.16 (23)	46.76 (16)	8.59 (23)
Poland	24.27 (22)	46.94 (15)	45.45 (19)	0.29 (24)
Romania	6.7 (24)	23.47 (24)	16.67 (24)	13.82 (21)

Table 4. Typology of countries based on the extent to which adult education has been realised as a common good

Countries Dimensions of adult education as a common good	Denmark, Luxembourg, Finland, Sweden	Germany, Estonia, Spain, France, Cyprus, Hungary, Netherlands, Austria, Norway	Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia	Belgium, Malta, Slovakia	Greece, Italy, Latvia,	Romania
Accessibility	High	High to medium	Medium to low	Low	Low	Low
Availability	High	Heterogeneous	Medium to low	Heterogeneous	Medium to low	Low
Affordability	Medium	Heterogeneous	Medium to low	High	Low	Low
Social commitment	Predominantly high	High to medium	Medium to low	High to medium	Medium to low	Low
Adult education as a common good is	Reality	Feasible	Possible	Ambiguous	Problematic	Invisible