Network Governance in Adult Education: An International Comparison of Network-Focussed Political Strategies for the Provision of Adult Education in Italy, Nigeria and Germany

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ABSTRACT

Network governance aims to create synergies between the competencies and resources of different institutional actors to deal with complex and interlinked problems. Interorganisational networks are capable of coordinating different products and services of their members, regulating the mutual recognition of qualifications, and rationalising work by sharing people and infrastructure. Network governance is thus a type of policy that takes the diversity of adult education as a starting point and ultimately harnesses it for efficient service delivery. Our critical reflection is based on the question as to what role network governance plays in the institutionalisation of adult education. We therefore analyse political documents (laws, policy documents, funding programmes, recommendations for action, and strategy papers) to compare three cases from Italy, Nigeria, and Germany, focussing on the goals of networks, the actors and stakeholders involved, and the realised forms of collaboration. Our findings show how closely network governance is linked to overarching political cultures and objectives.

KEY WORDS

interorganisational networks; adult education; governance

Governação em Rede na Educação de Adultos: Uma Comparação Internacional de Estratégias Políticas Centradas nas Redes de Oferta de Educação de Adultos na Itália, Nigéria e Alemanha

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RESUMO

A governação em rede pretende criar sinergias entre as competências e os recursos de diferentes atores institucionais para lidar com problemas complexos e interligados. As redes interorganizacionais são capazes de coordenar diferentes produtos e serviços dos seus membros, regulando o reconhecimento mútuo de qualificações, e racionalizando o trabalho através da partilha de pessoas e infraestrutura. Assim, a governação em rede é um tipo de política que tem como ponto de partida a diversidade da educação de adultos e a aproveita para gerar ofertas mais eficientes. A nossa reflexão crítica procura discutir o papel que a governação em rede tem na institucionalização da educação de adultos. Para tal, analisamos documentos políticos (leis, documentos de políticas, programas de financiamento, recomendações para ação, e documentos de estratégias) e comparamos três casos (Itália, Nigéria e Alemanha), com enfoque nas metas das redes, nos atores e interessados envolvidos, e nas formas de colaboração realizadas. Os nossos resultados mostram o quanto a governação em rede está intimamente ligada às culturas e objetivos políticos globais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

redes interorganizacionais; educação de adultos; governança

Gobernanza en Red en la Educación de Adultos: Una Comparación Internacional de Estrategias de Políticas Centradas en Redes de Oferta de Educación de Adultos en Italia, Nigeria y Alemania

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RESUMEN

La gobernanza en red tiene como objetivo crear sinergias entre las habilidades y los recursos de diferentes actores institucionales para hacer frente a problemas complejos e interconectados. Las redes interorganizacionales son capaces de coordinar diferentes productos y servicios de sus miembros, regular el reconocimiento mutuo de calificaciones y agilizar el trabajo mediante el intercambio de personas e infraestructura. Por lo tanto, la gobernanza en red es una política que toma la diversidad de la educación de adultos como punto de partida y la aprovecha para prestar un servicio más eficiente. Nuestra reflexión crítica se basa en buscar conocer el papel que juega la gobernanza en red en la institucionalización de la educación de adultos. Con este fin, analizamos documentos políticos (leyes, documentos de política, programas de financiación, recomendaciones para la acción y documentos de estrategia) para comparar tres casos de Italia, Nigeria y Alemania, centrándonos en los objetivos de las redes, los actores y las partes involucradas y las formas de colaboración realizadas. Nuestros resultados muestran la estrecha relación entre la gobernanza en red y las culturas globales y los objetivos políticos.

PALABRAS-CLAVE

redes interorganizacionales; educación de adultos; gobernanza

Network Governance in Adult Education: An International Comparison of Network-Focussed Political Strategies for the Provision of Adult Education in Italy, Nigeria, and Germany

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INTRODUCTION

The global COVID-19 pandemic has forcefully shown how crises can challenge our entire society as well as its central functional systems (such as the educational system and not least adult education). At the same time, the current crisis highlights the importance of longer-term, more comprehensive transformation processes such as digitalisation, the intensification of social inequalities, and climate change. These social, cultural and economic transformations pose new challenges for adult education organisations which they may not always be able to master on their own.

One possible way to deal with such challenges more appropriately, successfully and efficiently is to address them collectively through the development of interorganisational networks. Networks can serve not only to promote lifelong learning and to develop sustainable educational infrastructure but also to link different areas of lifelong learning and even different social worlds within society, thus broadening access to learning opportunities (Strobel, Reupold, & Tippelt, 2010, p. 7). Harnessing these potential benefits of networks has increasingly become a goal of policies in the field of adult education, especially since the 2000s. Until today, networks play an important role in policymaking at EU level (Milana, Trona, & Klatt, 2020) and for the cooperation of adult education providers at the regional, national and transnational levels (e.g. European Commission, 2019).

This paper assumes that the global significance of network-based policies in adult learning and education goes hand in hand with a differentiation of their respective goals, structures and practices. We aim to shed light on these differences and their backgrounds through an international comparison of interorganisational adult education networks. Our central research question is thus: How does network governance – despite its global presence and importance – systematically differ between the different countries in question and how do these differences relate to historically institutionalised (national) structures and cultures of adult education and learning.

Empirically, we will compare network governance in three different countries: Italy, Nigeria and Germany. For this comparison, we will analyse general policy documents from different governance levels as well as programmatic papers and statements from within the networks investigated. These data will be revised in the light of five comparative categories emerging from the theoretical framework. Drawing on this

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comparison, we will argue that different rationales underlie the implementation of network governance in the countries in question. Tension between an empowering grass-roots approach and a rationalising efficiency approach stands out in particular.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, we aim to provide the theoretical and conceptual foundations for our investigation of network governance in international adult education. The concept of network governance must first be clarified as even the term governance alone is "popular but notoriously slippery" (Ansell & Torfing, 2016, p. 2). While being used as an analytical term for the study of any governmental action, it is at the same time associated with a specific conception of the *mode* of government it denotes. In this case, it indicates a

> new mode of governing, different from the old hierarchical model in which state authorities exert sovereign control over the people and groups making up civil society (Mayntz, 1998). 'Governance' refers to a basically non-hierarchical mode of governing, where non-state, private corporate actors (formal organisations) participate in the formulation and implementation of public policy. (Mayntz, 2006, p. 1)

Network arrangements play a central role in the form of governance practice addressed here which seeks to distance itself from a more traditional hierarchical and centralised model that is focused on state actors. This demarcation movement owes much to a specific view of control. From the perspective of organisation theory, hierarchies and markets can be understood as two different basic approaches to social organisation (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1973). While hierarchies coordinate social action on the basis of defined memberships and roles, rules and routines, as well as the authority to issue directives, markets coordinate social action through selective relationships, contractuality, and the regulatory mechanism of price. Networks can then be seen as a third distinguished ideal type of social coordination which is "neither market nor hierarchy" (Powell, 1990) and offers specific advantages for the coordination of social action, particularly under the conditions of rapid social change. Networks can be seen as "the most flexible, and adaptable forms of organisation, able to evolve with their environment and with the evolution of the nodes that compose the network" (Castells, 2000, p. 15).

Especially since the 1990s, when digital information and communication technology made alternative forms of coordination possible (Castells, 2000), we can see a rise in network governance as a new form of (self-)organisation which promises more flexibility and adaptability by networking many (organisational) actors and sharing information, knowledge and resources. "The aim of network governance is to create a synergy between different competences and sources of knowledge in order to deal with complex and interlinked problems" (Dedeurwaerdere, 2005, p. 2). Networks thus benefit from the diversity of their nodes, and they connect actors from different fields of society such as business, politics, culture and education. The multitude of individual goals and experiences leads to an increased learning potential for the actors in the network. At the same time, heterogeneity poses a challenge when it comes to the negotiation of common goals and ways to pursue them. The formation of a common network identity is of

particular importance in order to overcome this difficulty. This not only evokes a feeling of connectedness among actors but also creates a perception of a unit by outsiders (Strobel et al., 2010, p. 4 f.).

These advantages of networks as a form of organisation ultimately make governance by networks an essential instrument of political control. This approach delegates a greater number of tasks to networks, which negotiate their collective coordination independently. This creates a high degree of diversity and individuality in the design of networks (Dedeurwaerdere, 2005, p. 3). Governance is to be implemented through decentralised networks of private and public actors, which in turn have networks and cooperation with international, national, and regional institutions. In this context, network governance is an attempt to consider the increasing importance of non-governmental organisations, the private sector, scientific networks, and international institutions in performing various functions of governance. This concept has clearly found its way into the Renewed Agenda, which calls for the engagement of social partners and the promotion of civil society (Council of the European Union, 2011, p. 3).

The rise of network governance should, however, also be critically framed against the backdrop of a "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007), which has spread since the last quarter of the last century, and the massive changes in the provision of public services, mostly discussed as "new public management" in Europe, the United States, and also Latin America. Networks are attractive from this perspective because they can tap into various sources of resources and potentially relieve the burden on public funding.

> The hierarchical model of government is in decline, pushed by governments' appetites to solve ever more complicated problems and pulled by new tools that allow innovators to fashion creative responses. This push and pull is gradually producing a new government model, in which executives' core responsibilities no longer centre on managing people and programs but on organising resources—often belonging to others—to produce public value. We call this trend 'governing by network'. (Eggers, 2008, p. 23)

We can see these connections clearly in adult education, where more market- and competition-oriented mechanisms have been established. Providers then become competitors in a market, but at the same time they are obliged to regulate this market collectively. Coordination of offers, mutual recognition of qualifications, and rationalisation through the joint use of resources such as premises or teaching staff are then aims of interorganisational networks. Networking is becoming an economic necessity for adult education organisations (Schwarz & Weber, 2010), and this re-organisation is often publicly initiated and funded. Against this theoretical background, the central question is therefore what role is assigned to network arrangements within firstly the national traditions of adult education and learning and secondly the currently prevailing idea of political control of adult education. Do network arrangements actually serve the broader participation of more diverse social groups in shaping adult learning and education (ALE) or do they primarily serve a lean state and the ongoing marketisation of adult education?

METHODOLOGY

Based on these preliminary conceptual considerations and the research question formulated at the outset, we undertook an international comparative study of network governance in adult education. The methodology of international comparative adult education research (Egetenmeyer, 2014) was the basis for our investigation, as it allowed us to compare different approaches to and forms of network governance in different countries by identifying similarities and differences, and it allowed us to interpret them in the light of different national and supranational regulations, traditions, and structures of adult education. Based on this research approach, an international team of researchers took a comparative look at their different countries of origin. The countries in question and the researchers were put together through upstream research in the framework of Adult Education Academy 2022, which took place at Würzburg University, Germany. For our comparison, we selected the countries of Italy, Nigeria, and Germany. This allowed us to compare two European countries, which have many similarities (e.g. their educational systems are rooted in the European Enlightenment, and they are intensively regulated at the EU level) but at the same time also have various national and regional peculiarities, with an African country, whose education system has completely different conditions and is not least shaped by the postcolonial situation.

Based on adult education network research, the *first step* was to carry out a country-specific inventory of network governance in adult education and then to analyse the function and effect of the networks (Schwarz & Weber, 2010). The focus was on identifying the network architectures of each country by reviewing and analysing (political) documents. What programmes on networking and what networks exist in adult education on what level (regional, national, transnational)? Are these networks connected to specific public policies and/or are they linked to strategies of providers, associations, or professionals in adult education? The documents analysed included, for example, laws, funding programmes, recommendations for action, and strategy papers related to interorganisational networks in adult education.

As a *second step*, we analysed a specific network that is important in the adult education system of each of the three countries. There are the structural characteristics of networks such as size, density, accessibility, and centrality (Strobel et al., 2010, p. 5). But from a socio-cultural perspective, we also had to describe governance within these networks by examining not only the "network architecture" but also its goals and purpose as formulated in their "founding pacts" and also the practices and relationships within the network – or rather the underlying principle as the "rule of relational game" (Assens & Lemeur, 2016, p. 12).

In the following chapter, we will briefly situate each network under study in the context of the national adult education landscape, and we will examine it as follows. We will first provide a basic description of the network. We will then conduct a categorical analysis on the basis of the categories **goals**, **actors/stakeholders**, **practices**, and **relationships**. We will finally assess the influence on adult education and the relevance for today as well as for the future.

ADULT EDUCATION NETWORKS IN ITALY, NIGERIA AND GERMANY

LOCAL NETWORKS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING IN ITALY

In Italy, the proposal of a networked system of lifelong education, coordinated by a nested hierarchical system of committees established at national, regional and local levels, emerged at the turn of the millennium (Milana, 2016, p. 196). All governments (state, regions, provinces and municipalities) reached an agreement (2000) that explicitly referred to the UNESCO Hamburg Conference framework on adult education as a citizenship right and promoted awareness about the reduction of social inequalities. The intended purpose was to better serve the needs of each territory by acknowledging and rationalising bottom-up experiences. Accordingly, networks for lifelong education were to be built on an initial citizens' request, whatever it may be, in order to offer further educational programmes that could trigger the willingness of adults to engage in new educational experiences.

The proposal contributed to the debate on adult education in civil society by suggesting a greater synergy among the different providers, including non-formal and informal ones. However, attention to lifelong education had been hindered under right-wing governments (2001-2006, 2008-2011) (Milana, 2016, p. 205) and the agreement was not translated into a structured normative framework. The institutionalisation of networks in adult education gathered momentum more than 10 years later with the creation of local networks for lifelong learning.

General Description of the Network

In autumn 2012, through a tortuous process that had begun several years before, the Italian adult education system was reorganised by a decree of the president of the republic, signed by the minister of education and the minister of economic development (DPR 263/2012, hereinafter referred to as "Reorganisation"). This policy introduced two main changes in the former system: (1) the administrative autonomy of the centres, which until then had been administratively dependent on the mainstream primary and lower secondary, or comprehensive, schools (Istituti Comprensivi) and (2) their arrangement in a network of educational service providers at provincial level: the Provincial Centres for Adult Instruction (CPIAs).

Only few months before the Reorganisation of the adult education system, the Italian parliament had approved "Labour market reform provisions in a perspective of growth" (L. 92/2012, hereinafter referred to as "Labour market reform"). For the first time, an Italian law mentioned lifelong learning as a pivotal strategy for active labour market policies. More specifically, the policy introduced a new unemployment benefit programme and developed it around an integrated system of education and training: the local networks for lifelong learning.

Both policies were formulated in a political climate overshadowed by concerns in Europe about the financial crisis and the risk of an Italian economic default. It was in this dramatic historical context, under a stream of austerity policies pursued by a technocrat government (2011-2013) (Landri, 2014), that network governance in adult education emerged out the entanglement of the two policy streams. Subsequent policy documents stated the central role of CPIAs in the network strategy by defining them as the reference nodes of the local networks for lifelong learning.

The architecture and characteristics of the new networks for lifelong learning are described in particular in four documents: a legislative decree (D. Lgs. 13/2013), two agreements between all governments (Agreement 2012, 2014), and an executive document which set the rules for CPIAs (Interministerial Decree, 12 March 2015, hereinafter referred to as "Guidelines").

Overall, the aims of the networks for lifelong learning are to recognise, promote and enhance the competencies of human capital, while also filling the main gaps of the country: namely, according to the policy, the limited relevance of products and services, the low level of adult participation especially among vulnerable groups, and the need to increase the number of providers (Agreement 2014).

Network governance is moreover considered the most suitable way of engaging with the European strategy for lifelong learning (D. Lgs. 13/2013). The integration among education, vocational training, and work is coherent with the Lisbon and Europe 2020 strategies "in order to revamp and support the growth and the development of the country" (Agreement 2012, Par. A.3). In this regard, the policy explicitly adheres to the construction of a European area for lifelong learning by drawing on financial resources available at European level such as the European Social Fund and the Youth Guarantee (Agreement 2012, 2014).

Categorical Analysis of the Network

The construction of a system for the recognition of prior learning is the premise for the specific **goals** of the local networks towards "transparency and comparability of learning at European level, in order to facilitate mobility, (for work and learning), valorising the human capital and the investment in European education and training, and thus contributing to make the productive system more solid and competitive, and to tackle the crisis" (Agreement 2014, p. 3). Accordingly, the local networks for lifelong learning are mainly concerned with the transition to or the re-entering of the labour market in times of recession. Networks are meant to fulfil everyone's right to receive guidance and support with regard to active labour market measures, including further education and training, upskilling and the recognition of credits or certificates for the competencies acquired through formal, informal and non-formal education.

The governance architecture reflects the centrality of citizens and their right to be served by local services according to the peculiarities and needs of the community. The policy sets up a coherent multilevel form of governance, in which regions have the crucial role of defining the most suitable organisational model for the networks, including their scope (at municipal or provincial level), the strategic priorities, and the subject to be involved. The state monitors, evaluates and provides guidelines. At the local level, different **stakeholders** in the network are considered "entry points" and are to serve the citizens by building and supporting their learning process.

CPIAs are identified as the promoters of connections between **stakeholders** and as the coordinators of local networks. It is worth noting that the educational offerings of CPIAs focus on Italian-language courses for immigrants and second-chance basic and lower secondary education for early school leavers. They are thus expected to cooperate with other stakeholders (Guidelines, 2015) in order to perform the following **practices**:

· enhance access to compulsory qualifications (together with upper secondary schools);
· reskill and upskill the labour force (joint projects with vocational training and technical or professional upper secondary schools);
· offer guidance services, especially those linked to active labour market policies (together with service providers such as job centres).

According to a survey conducted few years after the enactment of the policy (INAPP, 2018), the local networks coordinated by CPIAs are quite small. In 2017, only few CPIAs reported more than 9 connections that were different from other institutions for formal education. A second survey (INVALSI, 2020) showed that, after two years, the number of connections had increased to almost 21 on average.

Both surveys show that CPIAs tend to connect not only with other schools but also with municipalities and organisations of the third sector. As the main role of CPIAs is to support the educational needs of vulnerable groups, they probably tend to create synergy especially with the reference points for local social services.

Fewer agreements have been realised, especially in the southern regions, with vocational schools, job centres, and actors from the economic sector such as trade unions, corporations, and chambers even if CPIAs expressed a willingness to increase them.

Participants in the first survey mentioned two main barriers to the creation of durable cooperation **relationships** (INAPP, 2018, pp. 20-23): a lack of training, as staff do not necessarily have networking competencies, and a lack of financial resources, as the policy did not allocate a budget for networking activities. In addition, building synergy among stakeholders with different roles and objectives was extremely difficult, both in terms of the time and energy necessary to go beyond the specific priorities of each partner and due to the high employee turnover experienced by many stakeholders.

Impact on ALE and Future Relevance

To sum up, the stream of policies which conceptualised network governance in Italy has been developed at national level through a joint effort involving different ministries (education, labour and social policies, economic development, public administration and simplification) as part of a decentralisation strategy and in a political climate characterised by concern for the negative effects of the financial crisis. The establishment of networks for lifelong learning has been considered a suitable way to engage with the process of Europeanisation and to rationalise public expenditure through an integrated use of resources by different services.

Although the policy sees access to lifelong learning as an individual right, it frames lifelong learning options based on the labour market reform. Compared to the conceptualisation of network governance for lifelong education which underpinned the

initial proposal of the 2000 Agreement, the more recent one appears to downsize its outreach by concentrating on coordinated actions mostly aimed to serve the needs of the labour market and to offer basic and Italian as second-language skills. Consequently, the networks for lifelong learning struggle to meet a wide range of potential needs expressed by other target groups in adult population. For instance, data show that the participation of Italian students is very limited (INVALSI, 2020).

NIGERIA: NETWORKS BETWEEN STATE CONTROL AND GRASSROOTS POWER

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with some 300 million residents. Its educational structure, as stipulated in its National Policy on Education (NPE), is divided into basic, secondary, technical and tertiary education. The NPE also states the overall aims of adult education and non-formal education; basic education plays a crucial role, but vocational and professional learning are also relevant.

General Description of the Network

The National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) is a federal statutory agency set up to co-ordinate all aspects of adult and non-formal education in Nigeria, whether education is offered by government agencies or by non-governmental organisations. The NMEC thus establishes and fosters networks between different organisations in the field of adult education at the federal, state, and foreign level with the aim of spreading adult education across the country. The NMEC has a central role within this network, as it coordinates other adult education agencies and stakeholders in the provision of adult education and learning across the thirty-six states of the country. The NMEC has offices in the six geo-political zones of Nigeria and has state offices in each of the thirty-six states. This makes coordination easy and grass roots mobilisation highly effective.

Categorical Analysis of the Network

The **goals** of the adult education network under consideration include (1) synergising to achieve proper implementation of adult education policies and programmes through the process of training and recruiting facilitators and practitioners for the advancement of adult education, (2) designing and promoting strategies and templates for the conduct and implementation of national mass literacy programmes and campaigns in consultation with appropriate agencies of the federal and state governments, universities and non-governmental agencies, (3) developing, donating and disseminating teaching materials in distance education programmes aimed at primary-school leavers as well as mass-literacy, adult and non-formal education personnel, and (4) providing functional

literacy and continuing education for adults and youths who have not had the advantage of formal education or who did not complete their primary education, for example nomads, migrant families, disabled persons, and other categories or groups.

The network also aims at donating and sometimes soliciting funds from inside and outside the country with a view to promoting adult education activities and programmes. One major problem that has been facing the Nigerian education sector in general is a lack of funds. The government education budget has been very low over a number of years and this limits advances in adult education. Adult education networks have been making an effort to bridge this gap through a process of soliciting support from fellow NGOs, philanthropists and other concerned individuals for the funding of adult education. Adult education networks that are government agencies, e.g. NMEC, are also promoting increased funding for this sector.

Through its advocacy and enlightenment programmes, the network encourages citizens to be individually independent and to contribute meaningfully towards the growth and development of the country through the acquisition of and participation in adult education. It aims to provide education to different categories of graduates of the formal education system in order to improve their basic knowledge and skills. This is done through the provision of physical facilities for rural libraries, reading rooms, television viewing centres, and radio listener clubs for smooth and effective adult education learning outside the classroom situation. It also aims at sustaining cordial relationships and cooperation with state agencies for mass education and other stakeholders and creating awareness of the social, economic, cultural and political environment of adult education.

The most important **actors** in this network include government agencies such as the Federal Ministry of Education (FME), the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC), and the National Commission for Nomadic Education. It is also includes non-governmental organisations such as the Non-Governmental Association for Literacy Support Services (NOGALSS).

The **practices** and implementation of the network include establishing links with international development partners (IDPs) and multinationals, designing proposals to source funding and other forms of intervention from development partners and multinationals for literacy and non-formal education, encouraging and mobilising development partners for the support of mass literacy and non-formal education, leading the process of drafting memoranda of understanding for donor interventions in literacy and non-formal education, ensuring the proper coordination and implementation of all donor-supported intervention programmes in literacy and non-formal education, and arranging, coordinating and facilitating donor coordination.

The **relationship** between the actors is cordial as they have similar visions and missions (Ugwu & Oyebamiji, 2021). The following defines the relationship between the adult education actors in Nigeria. The government establishes stakeholder cooperation networks. National governments have access to stakeholders across the spectrum of adult education, including education providers, funders, employers, and non-governmental organisations. National governments are therefore ideally situated to encourage cross-sectoral dialogue between stakeholders to achieve more streamlined and efficient provision and funding of adult education. The education providers engage with other stakeholders by way of cooperating with businesses and NGOs to provide course developers with feedback regarding the demand for current skills and possible work experience placements.

As part of their relationship with other actors, NGOs create strategic coalitions with other stakeholders in order to have a positive impact on adult learning. These coalitions need not only be in the adult education sphere but are also target associations for active

and healthy ageing, media literacy organisations, publishers, etc. Social partners interact directly with target groups to educate them about the benefits and importance of adult education. It acts as a gateway to employment and the provision of professional training. Social partners provide and receive funding, and they help disseminate awareness-raising tools provided by other stakeholders.

Impact on ALE and Future Relevance

The network (NMEC) has national coverage. It has divisions across all the states in Nigeria through which it coordinates and provides support for adult education and learning. The network influences adult education and learning through its advocacy and enlightenment programmes and helps citizens to be individually independent and to contribute meaningfully towards the growth and development of the country through the acquisition of and participation in adult education (NMEC, 2021). Through mobilisation and networking, NMEC mobilises development partners for the support of mass literacy and non-formal education and leads the process of drafting memoranda of understanding for donor intervention in literacy and non-formal education. As part of its mobilisation and networking activities, NMEC works together with non-governmental actors such as NOGALSS, which in turn influence adult education and learning through their educational outreach efforts. They provide orientation and value re-orientation through their outreach efforts aimed at target populations at different times. NOGALSS, a non-governmental actor, does this through its educational outreach unit (NOGALSS, 2021).

"LEARNING REGIONS": PROMOTING ADULT EDUCATION NETWORKS AS A STATE-FUNDED POLITICAL PROJECT IN GERMANY

Networks have traditionally played an important role in the German adult education system. This is due to the specific structure of the adult education landscape and its legal regulation. Education as a whole and adult education in particular are the responsibility of the states in Germany. Therefore, there is not one national law on adult education but rather 16 different forms of relevant legal regulation. At the same time, the field of adult education providers has historically developed as a parcelled one in which government, churches and trade unions represent the traditional institutions, which are supplemented by private, commercial adult education providers and to which (time and again) new ones, for example those supported by social movements, have been added. The municipality or the region is thus the main level at which adult education programs and offers are made in the interplay between policies and legal regulation, different institutions and their traditional profiles, and adult learners as addressees. These regional social worlds of adult education thus usually involve competition as well as cooperation between adult education providers, a challenge that can be met primarily in the social form of the network.

The network idea has also been promoted by the government through programmes that are aimed at establishing new and expanding existing adult education networks. One of the most prominent was "Learning Regions – Supporting networks" (in German: „Lernende Regionen – Förderung von Netzwerken"). Its strategic aims are based on the idea of lifelong learning and are firmly anchored in the European Union's policies. Emphasis is placed on combating educational inequality, promoting basic competencies and the recognition of knowledge and skills, providing guidance in educational decisions, and developing new learning and teaching methods (Tippeltet, Reupold, Strobel, Kuwan, & Pekince, 2009, p. 206). To be able to react adequately to the increasingly complex demands of the continuing education sector, inter-organisational cooperation is becoming more and more important and necessary (Tippelt et al., 2009, p. 151). From 2001 to 2008, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, in consultation with the states, awarded funding for the establishment of networks at regional level which span different educational sectors and institutions (DIE, 2005). While the provision of financial resources may be in the foreground in order to realise incentives and opportunities for network formation, scientific support was also provided throughout the entire funding period. This serves to provide a scientific foundation for knowledge about action, especially about network management and planning. It also ensures the scientific evaluation of the programme. In particular, the impact of the programme is to be analysed and success factors and obstacles for the establishment of regional networks were to be worked out (DIE, 2001).

This is also why the programme has been so well documented that we now have an excellent literature foundation on which to base the following account. We chose this programme as a case to be analysed in the following because (1) it has supported many (different) networks in over 75 regions throughout Germany and (2) it has been in existence for some time so that we can also take a (cautious) look at the question of what remains of such funding programs in the long term.

The concept of "region" is to be understood as an analytical construct that social sciences apply to different realities. Fundamentally, it refers to proximity in geographic space and is therefore used particularly prominently in human and economic geography. From such an economic perspective, education and qualification structure can be considered important development factors of a region and are closely linked to the municipal and regional task of creating educational opportunities – which then in turn brings adult education into focus (Tippelt et al., 2009, p. 31). Although this connection between education and regional development has been discussed in Germany since the 1970s, it was the programme "Learning regions", that has given a massive boost to the emergence of learning regions (Gnahs, 2006).

Longworth defines learning regions as follows:

A learning city, town or region recognises and understands the key role of learning in the development of basic prosperity, social stability and personal fulfilment, and financial resources creatively and sensitively to develop the full human potential of all its citizens. It provides both a structural and mental framework which allows its citizens to understand and react positively to change. (Longworth, 2006, p. 23)

With the funding programme "Learning Regions – Supporting Networks", Germany is pursuing the overarching (European) **goal** of realising lifelong learning. This goal is to be achieved through the self-organised and self-responsible development and establishment of a regional learning culture (DIE, 2005). In particular, the focus is on improving the use of existing resources, strengthening willingness and demand for education, and expanding and further developing learning opportunities in a participant-oriented manner (DIE, 2001). Four main objectives were:

- *Permeability and networking,* which refer mainly to permeability between different educational sectors and between formal, non-formal and informal learning
- *Regional responsibility for education* against the background of the assumption that the claim of lifelong learning can be realised in regional contexts in particular
- *New learning cultures* that are to be expressed above all in increased flexibility and personal responsibility and
- *Sustainability and transfer* through specific instruments ensuring that the networks remain active beyond the end of the funding (Nuissl, 2006a, pp. 36-37)

The **actors and groups** addressed by the funding programme are diverse and can be assigned to different areas of society. In total, 34% of network partners were adult education providers. Other important institutions from the education sector were schools (10%) and universities (7.2%). There were also actors from industry (corporations: 7%, chambers of trade and commerce: 6.2%, trade unions: 1.2%) and from the cultural and political spheres (municipalities: 11.5%; economic development agencies: 4.8%; non-profit organisations: 13%) in the programme (Dobischat, Stuhldreier, & Düsseldorff, 2006, p. 61). Over the course of the programme, there were around 75 networks throughout Germany (Nuissl, 2006b, p. 39). In addition to the diversity of actors, there is also a large variation in terms of the size of the networks. For example, 35% of the networks have between 40 and 99 formally integrated cooperation partners. In 27% of the networks, this number is between 21 and 39. For networks with less than 20 partners, the percentage is 25%. Only 8% of the networks in the funding programme have more than 100 partners (Tippelt et al., 2009, p. 154).

If the question is asked about the **forms of implementation of cooperation**, it can be stated that no specific action projects are defined in the call for proposals for financial resources. Instead, there are phases of networking as well as focal points of work that must be considered in the application. The first phase includes the establishment of the network and the planning of joint projects. In the second phase, the planned projects must be implemented. Focal points within the phases can be, for example, the networking of educational areas, the linking of different policy fields, the creation of information and counselling services, the establishment of quality-assurance mechanisms, or the further training of staff (DIE, 2001). The initiators of the networks had to do a lot of work from the very beginning. It took a lot of convincing to find network partners who could start the network work. It was also necessary to generate and analyse

knowledge about the region and the people living there, for example regarding regional interests, positions and potentials (Tippelt et al., 2009, p. 152).

The importance of the task of recruiting network partners becomes clear when it is taken into account that 71% of the cooperative relationships between the majority of network actors were only established during the programme. Intensive **cooperative relationships** existed before the start of the programme, particularly between educational institutions, between different educational sectors, and between educational institutions and the labour administration. Selective cooperation existed, for example, between educational institutions and industry, between educational institutions and local politics, and between educational institutions and regional development. Through the programme "Learning Regions – Supporting Networks", it was possible to expand cooperative relationships at the regional level. The increase in cooperation between educational institutions and industry as well as between educational institutions and local politics is particularly pleasing (Tippelt et al., 2009, p. 158).

Impact on ALE and future relevance

The funding programme "Learning Regions – Supporting Networks" ended as early as 2008, but networks still play an important role in national education policy in Germany. The topic of learning regions, for example, can be found in the strategy paper "National Continuing Education Strategy 2019 to 2023" of the Federal Republic of Germany. For the period up to 2023, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs are pursuing the goal of strengthening the skilled labour base in Germany, facilitating career advancement for broad segments of the population, and sustainably promoting employability in a changing world of work. Aspects of regional networks are addressed in relation to continuing vocational education and training. The networking of regional policy actors is to be further strengthened. Funding and financing gaps are to be identified and closed. In addition, incentive systems must be created for the establishment of self-directed vocational learning. Another goal that was defined in the National Continuing Strategy is the creation of a systematic offer of education guidance for people of working age. To implement this, the Federal Employment Agency would like to acquire participants through cooperation with regional (further) education providers (BMAS & BMBF, 2019).

Further indications of the current importance of networks in adult education in Germany can also be seen in the funding guideline "Educational Municipalities" (in German: Bildungskommunen), which was published on 18 January 2022 by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. The aim is to improve educational management at the municipal level by promoting the coordination and development of an educational landscape. In this context, the partnership-based and sustainable cooperation structure between local actors is to be strengthened in both analogue and digital ways (BMBF, 2022). In addition to funding projects at the national level, similar political efforts can be seen in the international context of the international policy-oriented network "UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities". Similar to the concept of learning regions, the focus here is also on the consideration and promotion of territorial learning spaces. In terms of content, however, the aim is not primarily to network local actors in adult education but to support developments, especially through lifelong learning programmes, that promote justice, cohesion and peace (UNESCO, n.d.).

Before starting with a systematic comparison of the categories, we must look at the **scope of the networks**. The local networks for lifelong learning in Italy could be implemented on a provincial as well as on a municipal basis. It is up to the government of the respective region to decide on the size of the network. It should be emphasised that, despite regional activities, there is a network density of CPIA institutions across the country and thus different regions are covered. In the case of Nigeria, the network has national coverage while it also has divisions across all the states in Nigeria through which it coordinates and provides support for adult education and learning. The learning regions in Germany are state-funded projects that can be found in all states. But the network actors must find and organise themselves. The size and the scope of the networks thus vary greatly.

In Nigeria, the network is anchored at the national level but reaches down to the important level of local communities. In contrast, we find the region to be the most important level for networks both in the Italian and the German case. But while the term 'region' is important, it does have different underlying concepts. In Italy, for example, the region is a defined political unit, while in Germany regions are seen as spatial, socio-geographical units (for which no corresponding political units often exist).

One possible interpretation of the country-specific scope is the relation to the thematic relevance of networks. It is assumed that the political relevance of the networks is influenced by the increasing centrality of the topic for each country. In Nigeria, adult illiteracy is a pervasive challenge at the national and international levels (Fasokun & Pwol, 2008). Strong political efforts are also implemented as the centre of network activities. The Italian case is part of active labour-market policies, as it focuses mainly on supporting transitions from education to work, and the upskilling and reskilling of workers for the needs of the labour market. Political interest is strong, because Italy has the third highest unemployment rate in Europe (Eurostat, 2022). In the German case, no thematic areas are predefined for project funding. Instead, the aim is to respond to regional interests and needs with heterogeneous content and to dissolve limitations of political coordination.

The Italian case engages with the European strategy for lifelong learning by promoting the integration of education, vocational training, and work. Networking is a strategy to address the main problems of the education system as they are perceived by governments: the limited relevance of offers; the low level of adult participation and the large number of poorly-educated people, especially among vulnerable groups; and the need to increase the number of providers and offers, while at the same time reducing public expenditures.

In the Nigerian case, the networks aim at building up synergies to achieve a proper implementation of adult education policies and programmes by recruiting and training facilitators. A core aim is the design and promotion of strategies and templates for the conduct and implementation of national mass literacy programmes. This requires close cooperation and network relationships with state agencies, (international) NGOs as well as universities. It also calls for concrete measures for the shared use of resources, be it the development and dissemination of teaching materials or the provision of physical facilities. This is also designed to empower citizens to be individually independent and to contribute meaningfully towards the growth and development of the country through participation in adult education.

In Germany, the learning regions are strongly committed to the overall goal of realising lifelong learning and related strategies, especially within the framework of European lifelong learning policy. The network approach aims at a self-organised and self-responsible development and establishment of regional learning culture. This means strengthening the willingness and demand for education and expanding and further developing learning opportunities in a participant-oriented manner. This also means creating a more integrated adult education landscape, with more efficient creation of products and services, for example through the reduction of competing programmes and the targeted joint use of resources.

Again, we see many similarities between the Italian and the German case, as both are strongly influenced by European lifelong learning policies and refer to them at least as an "umbrella goal". At the same time, we can see that local networks for lifelong learning in Italy have a much narrower target corridor in that they very much focus on the transition between education and work, especially for early school leavers and immigrants. In the German case of learning regions, no content-related focus or overall target group for networks was specified by the programme, besides broadening access to further education. We can thus see different focal points in the networks. In Nigeria, by contrast, there is a clear focus on literacy education, and thus illiterate citizens are the main target group for this network. This objective is coherent with the overarching national education policy aspirations, which is why financial support also goes hand in hand with public institutions (non-public institutions are financed through donations). In Europe, one aim of the network programmes is to spend less public funds on adult education. In Italy, the establishment of local networks is a zero-cost policy, while in Germany networks are publicly funded on a project basis – which is also expected to save costs in the long term. If one considers the goals of the networks detached from their political scope and influence, a similar understanding of the goals of networks can be seen in all cases. Networks are understood to bring about change not only for individuals but also for society as a whole.

NETWORK ACTORS AND STAKEHOLDERS

In the Italian case, four different ministries participated in the policy-making process, as well as in a cross-level conference of governments of the state, the regions, the provinces and the municipalities. This reflects both the desire for decentralisation and the tendency to develop governance instruments that bring together different sectors of public policies such as social, labour economic and education policies. Network actors are, besides the CPIAs, mainly municipalities, third-sector organisations and secondary and vocational schools, but also universities, job centres, corporations, and trade unions.

In Nigeria, we can see cooperation between government agencies (Federal Ministry of Education (FME), the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non formal education (NMEC); National Commission for Nomadic Education) and non-governmental organisations, mainly in the form of the Non-Governmental Association for Literacy Support Services (NOGALSS). Network actors are universities, technical and vocational colleges, and literacy centres.

In Germany, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research is the programme leader with coordination offices at the level of the states. Network actors are quite diverse and can be assigned to different areas of society. While adult education providers

make up 34% of the network partners, other institutions of the education system such as schools and universities also play a vital role. The state sector (e.g. job centres) and the economic sector (corporations as well as trade unions) are also relevant network actors.

In all the cases we compared, we found political actors on the national level, with the education ministries as a partner. It is worth mentioning the integration of non-governmental institutions on the top level of the programme and as a partner in supporting learning at the grassroots level in Nigeria. Regarding network actors, we also found many similarities between all cases. In both European cases, the integration actors from the economic sector in the network appear to play a more important role.

These differences appear to shape the architecture of the networks. In Nigeria, a clearly state-driven policy sketches out a networking form of governance more as a means to connect national policies to grassroots-level initiatives as well as international NGOs; in Italy and Germany, the focus on the regional level underpins discourse on decentralisation as a means of rationalising public expenditure by addressing specific educational needs at the local level. The German case may show a more neoliberal approach, with more emphasis on self-regulation than on government-controlled approaches.

PRACTICES OF COLLABORATION

The local networks for lifelong learning in Italy realise a model of multilevel governance, with a strong emphasis on the need to draw on the specific educational needs at local and regional level. Accordingly, the government monitors and evaluates; the regions define the organisational model and the scope of the networks; while the Provincial Centres for Adult Instruction (CPIAs) have the crucial role of being reference nodes for the local networks for lifelong learning. This means that they should identify and connect with other local stakeholders or "entry points" which could support the educational needs of citizens.

In the case of Nigeria, establishing links with international development partners (IDPs) and multinationals is of crucial importance for the networks. They must design proposals and lead the process of drafting memoranda of understanding for donor intervention, and they must encourage and mobilise development partners. They arrange, coordinate, and facilitate donor coordination meetings and ensure the proper coordination and implementation of all donor-supported intervention programmes in literacy and non-formal education.

The "Learning Regions" programme in Germany comprises two phases. In the first phase, the establishment of the network and the planning of joint projects was facilitated. In the second phase, the planned projects are being implemented. We found different forms and strengths of network ties ranging from loose cooperation to institutionalised cooperation between regional actors, for example in the form of a registered association, with a coordination office, elected bodies, etc. While forms of cooperation are much more fixed in Italy and Nigeria through state control, the practices of collaboration are contingent in Germany.

Our interpretation shows connections between scope, issues, goals and actors. While the cases of Nigeria and Italy show a proximity to crucial political goals, the network actors also show a proximity to the state (educational) system. In the German case, political influence is limited, and the diversity of topics and goals increases with the large number of possible network partners.

Since the activities of the CPIAs are mainly aimed at integrating vulnerable groups, especially immigrants and early school leavers, they tend to connect mainly with municipalities and third-sector organisations, which offer social services to the same target groups. Through cooperative relationships, the CPIAs also tend to integrate their educational programmes with other educational institutions, especially those with a stronger vocational dimension, and with local job centres. However, due also to a lack of financial resources for covering expenditures for networking activities, the relationships they build are relatively limited, both in terms of stability and size.

In the Nigerian case, network actors share a similar vision and mission (Ugwu & Oyebamiji, 2021) and thus develop strong relationships. While the government establishes the networks, they are reinforced through the relationships of education providers to other stakeholders. NGOs create strategic coalitions to strengthen advocacy for adult learning. These coalitions are not necessarily only in adult education but also target associations for active and healthy ageing, media literacy organisations, publishers, etc. The social partners interact directly with target groups and act as a gateway to employment and the provision of professional training.

In the German case, cooperative relationships between most network actors were only established due to the programme, although they were based in part, of course, on already existing contacts and cooperative schemes. But the programme offers an incentive for intensifying relationships and collaboration and then in turn sharing them with other network partners. Especially the increase in sector-spanning cooperation, particularly between educational institutions and industry as well as between educational institutions and local politics is of great relevance regarding the aims of the programme. At the same time, the central nodes of the network are often organisations from the (public) adult education system.

When we compare these three cases, we can see that the core actors of the networks are different. In Italy, it is clearly the CPIAs that make up the central nodes of the network. In Nigeria, government agencies and NOGALSS collectively form the core of the network. In Germany, public adult education providers, particularly the VHS, often (though by no means necessarily) appear as central nodes, thus mirroring the overall importance of this public institution, which was already an important regional anchor point for adult education.

CONCLUSION

Against the background of the continuing importance and global spread of network governance in the field of adult education, we have raised the question in our paper of how the overarching logic of network governance is being concretised in different national contexts and how at the same time it is being adapted and changed in this process. Empirically, we dealt with this question in the form of an international comparison of networks from Italy, Nigeria and Germany.

Our findings show how closely network governance is linked not only to national and international policies but also to historical traditions and institutions in adult learning and education at the national and regional levels. In all three cases, the networks had been

created as a result of political initiative and could clearly be located in terms of political objectives such as a shared use of knowledge, resources and information. At the same time, however, networks as a governance model in adult education are appealing because they harness the local and regional diversity of different (adult) education provider organisations and sometimes also bring in actors from other social fields. They thus hopefully contribute to dynamisation and innovation of the field of adult learning and education and artfully oscillate between bottom-up strategies and top-down control.

Against this backdrop, future research efforts must be directed even more strongly towards empirical investigations of this amalgamation of top-down and bottom-up control in everyday practice and, in particular, must also elaborate the long-term significance of this cultural dimension for the effects of network control. This is all the more true as increasing digitalisation in the education sector will increase the chances of complex, technology-driven forms of network control (for example based on blockchain technology; Zwitter & Hazenberg, 2020). This possible renaissance of network control by new means has not yet been sufficiently recognised and academically studied.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization and Methodology: JS, JK; Investigation: JS, FL, JK, FIM, SAF; Analysis and Writing: JS, FL, JK, FIM, SAF, Resources: JS, FL, JK, FIM, SAF.

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