

CONTINUOUS EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A TOOL OF SOCIAL EQUITY AND INCLUSION

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Abstract: *From the perspective of the sustainable development of society in general, lifelong learning is essential for social equity and inclusion, providing equal access to learning opportunities, especially for marginalized groups (people with disabilities, from disadvantaged backgrounds and in rural areas). Shared values, respect for diversity and gender equality can be cultivated and promoted including through community education and project-based learning, thus reducing socio-economic inequalities. Effective implementation of such an approach requires identifying and addressing structural barriers, monitoring individual and social factors, and ensuring the relevance of educational programs. However, strategies to improve lifelong learning are vital to turn possibilities into real opportunities and improve access for all people.*

Keywords: *Continuous education, sustainable development, equity and social inclusion, legal access to opportunities, improvement strategies for long-life education, "Upskilling" program.*

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1. Introduction

Continuous education, including **community education**, project-based learning (PBL), can significantly contribute to social equity and inclusion through equal access to learning opportunities, by including people with disabilities, from disadvantaged backgrounds, and rural areas in various socio-educational programs, by promoting common values and respect for diversity and gender equality, etc. - all these provide equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic context [1].

Among the **benefits of continuous education**, we can mention:

- investment in updating and/or learning new IT techniques, which allows the creation of premises for maintaining competitiveness and adapting to new market requirements;
- improving and/or acquiring new skills and abilities by employees through "Upskilling" programs ("continuous professional development and focusing on active learning to keep the workforce relevant and competitive in a constantly changing business environment"), increasing networking opportunities, thus career prospects and better-paid positions [3];
- participation in continuous education programs contributes to personal development (self-confidence, development of critical thinking, development of problem-solving and time management skills, reducing anxiety).

The benefits and challenges of continuous education can be measured, perceived over time, both based on quantitative and qualitative indicators, as well as on structural

barriers faced by an institution/entity, with individual and social factors, with issues related to the relevance of continuous education. However, if continuous education is a real tool for social equity and inclusion, certain strategies to improve continuous education are necessary to enhance social equity and inclusion full of opportunities. Thus, this article addresses the impact of continuous education on social equity and inclusion, emphasizing strategies for integrating sustainable development principles into the educational system, but also increasing their impact on vulnerable groups.

The relevance of this article is justified by the practical-applicative importance of continuous education in reducing inequalities and increasing social mobility, including socially, economically, and culturally marginalized groups, as well as improving social cohesion (participation in identifying social problems and public debates with the active involvement of the government, educational institutions, employers, non-governmental organizations, local communities), cultivating entrepreneurial spirit and skills, etc.), thus contributing to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals in the EU context (especially goals 4, 5, 8, 10, 16, 17). [4]

2. Literature Review

Continuous education (also known as "lifelong learning") is approached by Peter Jarvis as "a way to cope with changes in society and improve skills and knowledge" [5]. EUROSTAT (2025) defines **continuous education** as "all forms of learning that take place throughout life, aimed at improving knowledge, skills, and competencies."

From the perspective of continuous education, H. George Frederickson defines **social equity** as "a concept that focuses on ensuring justice and fairness in the educational process, so that all individuals have access to equal learning and development opportunities, each individual being provided with what they need to fully develop, taking into account social, economic, and cultural differences." [7]

Maria Vremiş et.al. defines **social inclusion** as "a process through which those at risk of poverty and social exclusion are provided with the necessary resources and opportunities for full participation in economic, social, and cultural life - a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal within the society where they live; under these conditions, these individuals have a more pronounced participation in the decision-making process on issues that concern them, being ensured access to fundamental rights." [8]

3. Methodology

This article used a mixed methods approach to collect and analyze information on the effects of continuing education on equity and social inclusion. Thus, it used: academic literature review, policy documents and reports from international organizations (such as UNESCO, European Commission), databases such as Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar, government publications and NGO reports, key policy documents such as the European Pillar of Social Rights, national education strategies and reports from organizations such as the European Court of Auditors to understand current frameworks and initiatives. Information and updates from various websites and organizations such as the Ministry of Education and Research, the Association for Entrepreneurship Training and Development (AFAD), Equity, etc. have also been gathered to provide relevant examples of actions already undertaken for lifelong learning.

5W1H Framework: The 5W1H framework (Who, What, When, Where, Why, How) was used to organize the analysis and make sure all important parts of the research questions were covered. And the information gathered from various sources was synthesized to create a clear perception and understanding of the topic.

4. Results and Discussion

The relevance of this article is justified by the practical-applicative importance of continuous education in reducing inequalities and increasing social mobility, including socially, economically, and culturally marginalized groups, as well as improving social cohesion (participation in identifying social problems and public debates with the active involvement of the government, educational institutions, employers, non-governmental organizations, local communities), cultivating entrepreneurial spirit and skills, etc.), thus contributing to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals in the EU context (especially goals 4, 5, 8, 10, 16, 17). [4]

The key questions that guided us in this work were: 1- *To what extent does continuous education contribute to social equity and inclusion?* 2- *What are the main structural barriers to access to quality continuous education?* 3- *How can the impact of continuous education be optimized through sustainable educational strategies and policies?*

According to the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (Education, training, and lifelong learning), "every person has the right to education, vocational training, and lifelong learning, inclusive and high-quality courses, to acquire and maintain skills that allow them to fully participate in society and successfully manage transitions in the labor market" [9]:

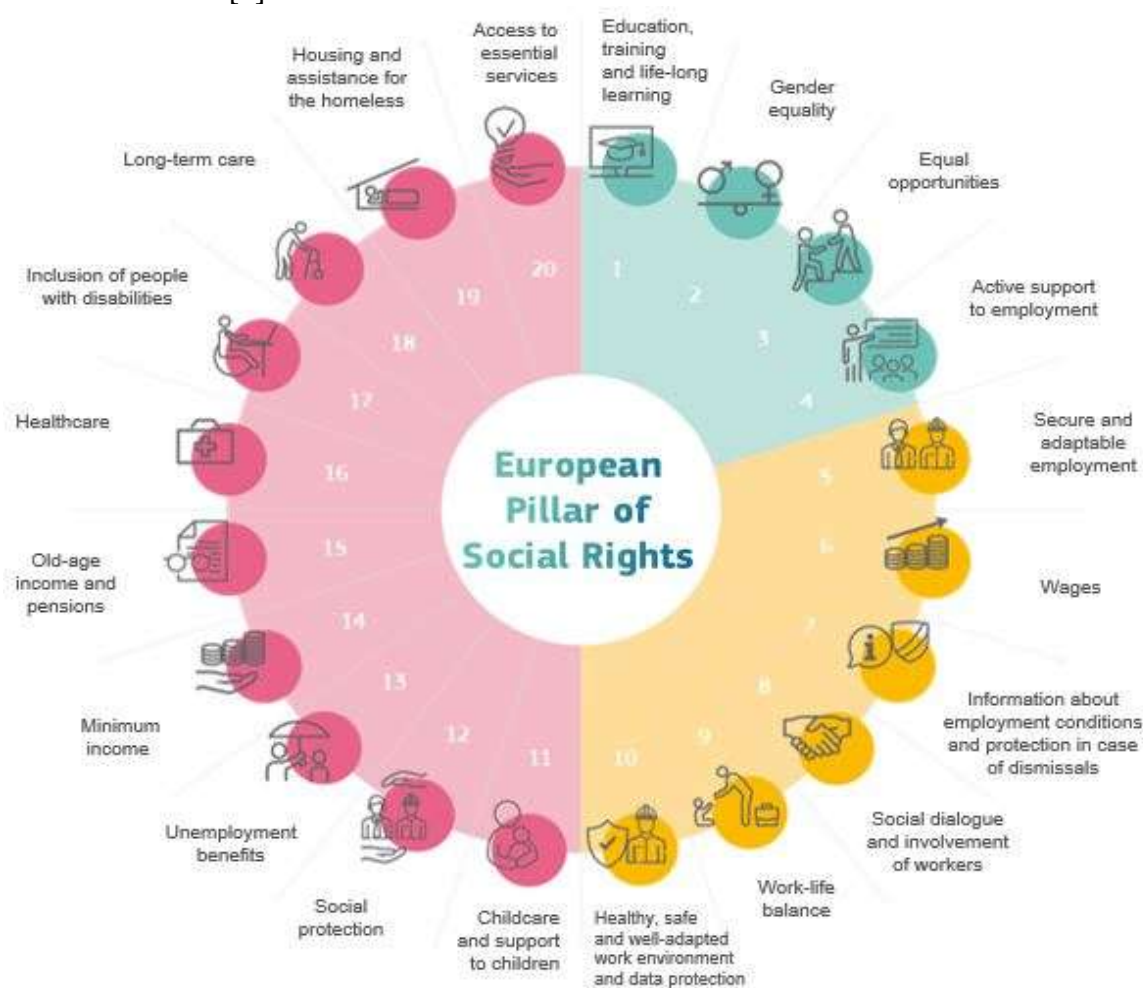


Figure 1. European Pillar of Social Rights

Source: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en

The methodological guide "Early Inclusive Education", developed within the Project "Development and Promotion of Inclusive Education" and implemented by Lumos Foundation in coordination with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research of the Republic of Moldova (MEC of RM), clearly stipulates: "The Global Agenda 2030 for sustainable development clearly states that disability and special needs in development and learning cannot be a reason or criterion for restricting access to the realization of the right to education. The ODD framework includes targets that explicitly refer to disadvantaged groups in relation to which the states of the world commit to combating inequalities and guaranteeing quality, inclusive and equitable education." [10]

Thus, not only early education must be inclusive, but also continuous education, lifelong learning. Long-term unemployed, women returning to the labor market after maternity leave, refugees, migrants, people living in poverty, national minorities, people without qualifications or with a low level of education, people with disabilities, people from disadvantaged backgrounds and rural areas with limited employment opportunities acquire and/or need to acquire skills relevant to a better-paid, more stable job for life and active citizenship thanks to various international projects (EU4Moldova, Erasmus+, UNDP, UNICEF, UN Women Moldova, organizations specialized in financial education - "Financial Education Moldova", "Foundation for Financial Education "OK"" etc.; Junior Achievement Moldova, EBRD etc.) that promote and implement programs for personal development, digital literacy, financial education, and communication and teamwork skills.

From an economic perspective, access to continuous education for vulnerable groups, therefore to quality education programs and jobs, as well as monitoring and evaluating the impact of these continuous education programs, is determined by the concern for smart, sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

From an educational perspective, extended access to quality education can be considered an indispensable condition for the realization of an Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027. (European Commission. Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, 2020)

According to the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, from early childhood education and care (ECEC) to tertiary education, adult education and non-formal learning, "education and training constitute the foundation of successful participation in society and one of the most powerful tools for building more inclusive societies."

What does the European Commission want to achieve in the field of continuous education and employment? What does the Republic of Moldova want to achieve in the field of continuous education and employment? The answer is transparent and unequivocal:

- strengthening the inclusive nature of our education systems; promoting an inclusive educational system based on democracy, active citizenship and critical thinking skills; providing guidance and mentoring especially for people in transition;
- learning the host country's language as essential for successful integration into a new socio-educational and professional environment (especially for refugee or migrant students, who often face difficulties adapting to a new learning environment, and here it is appropriate to mention the "National program on learning the Romanian language by national minorities, including the adult population, for the years 2023-2025"); [12]
- promoting multilingualism as "one of the eight key competences necessary for anyone to fulfill themselves personally, to have a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, to integrate more easily into the labor market and to be an active and

socially integrated citizen", this being emphasized by the EU Member States in the Council recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning; [13]

- providing specific training for youth workers to acquire the necessary integration skills (for example, mobility projects for youth workers); [14]
- improving the recognition of qualifications through promoting cooperation between national authorities responsible for integration and national centers for the recognition of qualifications (ENIC-NARIC networks); supporting transparent practices for recognizing refugee qualifications through the Erasmus program; [14]
- supporting inclusive entrepreneurship and promoting inclusive mentoring, encouraging entrepreneurial spirit among migrants through individualized training and mentoring programs and opening integrated support structures for migrants' entrepreneurial spirit, as well as including entrepreneurship in integration programs; [14]
- developing an EU action plan on inclusive e-governance, which promotes human-centered digital public services for citizens, including migrants, and migrant participation in the creation and provision of digital public services etc. [14]

The main structural barriers to access to quality continuous education for vulnerable groups are:

1. Educational institutions in rural areas have limited access to educational resources.
2. Financial expenses associated with education often represent an obstacle for low-income individuals, which reduces their chances of accessing quality continuous education programs.
3. The lack of modern educational infrastructure and adequate technologies in such rural educational institutions affects the quality of continuous education.
4. The insufficient number of qualified teaching staff to teach Financial Education, Entrepreneurship and other subjects in disadvantaged areas.
5. The lack of recognition of non-formal learning outcomes, which limits continuous education opportunities for vulnerable individuals.
6. The lack of continuous collaboration between educational institutions, state institutions and employers often becomes an impediment to the effective implementation and monitoring of continuous education program results.

Therefore, certain **sustainable educational strategies and policies are necessary to optimize the impact of continuous education**. This is possible through:

1. Using digital educational platforms and tools to extend access to continuous education in rural areas

In 2024, Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova announced the list of institutions that will be part of the "Model Schools Network", a national project that involves the renovation and complete equipping of 35 general education institutions in the country - the aim of the initiative being to increase access to quality education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially those from small rural localities. [15]

In 2025, Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova mentioned that many educational institutions still face a deficit of technological resources, which limits students' access to modern learning tools. In this regard, UNICEF equipped 70 schools with modern equipment, this initiative being aligned, according to the Minister

of Education and Research, Dan Perciun, with the "Education Development Strategy 2030, the National Digital Transformation Strategy 2023-2030 and other relevant policies" [16];

2. Implementing projects, funding programs and financial support for individuals from socially and economically vulnerable groups:

In the plan of the Ministry of Education and Research for 2025, the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova stipulates: "The quality of education directly depends on the well-being and preparation of teaching staff. (...) In addition to investments in teachers and researchers, we will continue investments in modernizing infrastructure and equipment. A quality educational system requires modern and well-maintained infrastructure. Classrooms, laboratories, libraries and sports spaces must meet current standards, providing students and teachers with a safe and attractive learning environment. The digitalization of educational institutions is a priority, ensuring equal access to technology for all students, regardless of their background. In 2025, we will continue several initiatives started in 2024 and allocate resources for investments in schools, kindergartens, vocational schools, colleges and universities. (...) Education is for everyone, and our system must be inclusive, responding to the needs of every child. The Ministry is committed to supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds, ensuring access to psychological counseling services and creating a safe environment, free from bullying or discrimination. The physical and emotional well-being of children is the foundation on which their educational and personal success is built. (...) The curriculum must be dynamic, adapted to current needs and challenges. It is crucial to introduce transversal skills such as critical thinking, creativity, digital and entrepreneurial education, and to promote subjects that meet labor market requirements. We will collaborate with the private sector and international experts to develop and contribute to the creation of a relevant and competitive curriculum." [17] [18]

Another example of increasing the awareness of vulnerable individuals about available social services and how to access them is the project "Justice and Equity for People in Difficulty", a project implemented by the Social Justice Center "Equity", president Maria Zugravu, whose objectives are to increase the awareness of vulnerable individuals about available social services and how to access them, as well as to improve social services for disadvantaged individuals. The mentioned project is carried out by AO Social Justice Center "Equity" in partnership with People in Need Moldova within the project "Moldova ASSIST: improving access to quality public services and social cohesion", funded by the European Union. [19]

A relevant example of support for NEET youth living in the Security Zone for their educational inclusion and employment is the Project "Equal Opportunities for All and Everyone", part of the project "Better Opportunities for NEET Youth (Youth Inclusion Initiative)", implemented with the support of the Eastern European Foundation in partnership with the National Youth Council of Moldova, the Partnership for Development Center and the Regional Development Agency of Transnistria, from resources provided by the European Union and Sweden. Within the project, information and awareness activities were carried out for young people from 36 localities within the "Profession Caravan". [20]

An example of promoting social activism and entrepreneurial spirit among women and youth, democratic values based on the principle of equal opportunities between women and men, as well as active involvement in the economic and social life of the community is A.O. Association for Entrepreneurial Training and Development (AFAD), which aims to contribute to the economic and social development of the country by creating and developing a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem and providing economic and social development opportunities. Thus, the implementation of projects "Strengthening socio-economic resilience in RM for vulnerable women and girls, refugees from Ukraine and the local community, affected by the crisis" (July

2023 - January 2024), "Digital education for young people with initiative" (July 2022), "Increasing resilience through employment and social cohesion" (2024), "Export opportunities for beneficiaries of Business Skills Hub" (May 29, 2024 - January 30, 2025), Employment and Integration Support Center "ESC" (2023-2024) etc. - all through its members, beneficiaries and employees, respect and advocate for the respect of the rights of every person without any discrimination, promote active involvement in the economic and social life of the community, as well as the valorization of the unlimited potential of each community member in order to improve the economic and social situation. [21]

3. Attracting and implementing investments in the infrastructure of modern educational institutions in disadvantaged areas

A distinctive feature of the National Development Strategy "European Moldova 2030" (hereinafter - NDS), approved by Law no. 315/2022, consists in the accountability of public authorities in its implementation, by developing a coherent implementation mechanism, which ensures clear synchronization between NDS, sectoral and institutional strategies and the budget planning framework. To ensure the realization of this desideratum, the Strategic Planning Framework, established according to Government Decision no. 386/2020, provides for the development of the **National Development Plan for the years 2024-2026**, with objectives relevant to sustainable educational strategies and policies to optimize the impact of continuous education, such as: **General Objective 1.** Increasing income from sustainable sources and mitigating inequalities, **General Objective 3:** Ensuring appropriate and quality education for all throughout life.

4. Recruiting and retaining qualified teaching staff in rural areas can improve the quality of continuous education

In 2024, Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova announced a deficit of 1,033 teaching staff at the beginning of the new school year. [22]

According to the Study "Evaluation of the initial and continuous professional training system for teaching staff in the Republic of Moldova", the study carried out within the project "Strengthening the system of continuous professional training and development of human resources in the field of education" (2023), implemented by the Institute for European Policy and Reform, with financial support from the Open Society Foundations, one of the consolidated recommendations of all study participants aims at: "Ensuring good living, working and equipment conditions for the teaching staff assigned to small urban and rural areas", this recommendation being justified as follows: "To motivate teaching staff to participate in continuous training and to retain teachers in the education system, in addition to a decent salary, the Government and Local Public Authorities must ensure good living, working and equipment conditions for teaching activities. Excellence and quality cannot be demanded in small urban and rural areas without normal conditions for carrying out activities - the physical condition of schools, utilities, equipment and teaching materials." [23]

5. Developing mechanisms for recognizing non-formal learning outcomes to extend educational opportunities for socially and economically vulnerable groups

According to Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova, **the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes** is "a priority for policy agendas both for developed and developing countries. Although learning usually takes place in a formal context, a large part of learning is carried out either non-formally or informally. Currently, the knowledge, skills and competencies specific to a profession, obtained in this way, do not allow employment due to the lack of opportunity to certify them. The recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes will

contribute to improving employability and mobility, as well as increasing motivation for lifelong learning, especially for socio-economically disadvantaged individuals, individuals with special educational needs or those with low qualifications. The impact of validating non-formal and informal learning can also contribute to improving the functioning of the labor market, strengthening competitiveness and economic growth." [24]

At the same time, Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova ensures the development, promotion and implementation of policies in the field of authentication, recognition and equivalence of study documents and qualifications. The National Qualifications Framework Directorate, a structural subdivision of the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova, has the competence to systematically establish and update, in accordance with national and international requirements, the normative framework regarding the process of authentication, equivalence and recognition of study documents and qualifications and monitoring its implementation. Study documents for recognition, equivalence and authentication (except for the recognition and equivalence of study periods for continuing studies in national education) are submitted to the Information and Communication Technologies Center in Education (CTICE) of the Ministry of Education and Research.

According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, equity is very important for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – especially Goal 4.5, which focuses on “eliminating gender disparities and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and training for vulnerable people, including persons with disabilities, indigenous communities and children in vulnerable situations.” [25]

According to EUROSTAT data, public spending on education represents "one of the most important investments that can be made in people". We quote: "Education has the potential to boost socio-economic development: this is especially the case in a globalized world where a highly skilled workforce can be an advantage in terms of productivity, innovation and competitiveness". [26]

According to the European Commission, "Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030" outlines the vision for the development of continuous learning until 2030, one of its priority areas being "quality, equity, inclusion and success in adult learning". [27]

From an international model perspective, there are countries that support social inclusion through various effective continuous education programs. For example, **Finland** stands out for implementing professional retraining programs that provide equal opportunities for all social categories. According to the **Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI)**, the **Liberal Adult Education system in Finland** includes adult education centers, folk high schools, learning centers, sports training centers and summer universities that promote active citizenship and the eco-social perspective, offering adapted courses (basic skills, literacy, writing, calculation and digital skills, Finnish language courses, professional life and social orientation) including for individuals with a low level of education such as refugees and immigrants. [28]

Germany stands out for its dual learning system that combines theory with practice, thus facilitating access to jobs. **Continuous education in Germany** responds to labor market requirements, people's needs to obtain additional qualifications and extend knowledge through multiple formal and informal programs offered by municipal institutions, private institutions, religious organizations, chambers of industry and commerce, associations, companies, public institutions, academies, vocational schools, universities (for example, "non-formal education courses for adults who want to acquire new skills in sewing, basic home repairs etc., master's courses and seminars, online courses, foreign language and integration courses, vocational training, training programs for executives such as Executive MBA") etc. [29] **Canada**

(Government of Canada) through digital education initiatives, aimed at supporting the integration of immigrants and low-income individuals. [30]

5. Conclusions

Continuous education is an essential tool for promoting equity and social inclusion, having a direct impact on sustainable economic development. Extended access to lifelong learning reduces inequalities and supports the transition to a sustainable economy. And to maximize the benefits of continuous education, an integrated educational policy is necessary, based on collaboration between educational institutions - local authorities - the private sector.

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