CRITICAL ADULT EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE SECURITY

Salem Saaidia is a Senior Special Education Educator and a PhD candidate in Subject Didactics and Pedagogy at the Virtual University of Tunis. His research focuses on activity analysis for the development of training and professionalisation programmes for adult practitioners working with persons with disabilities and/or individuals in situations of vulnerability.

Kaouther Rassaa is a Senior Lecturer and researcher at the Faculty of Sciences of Tunis, Tunisia. She holds a PhD in Physical Education, and her research focuses on the analysis of learning difficulties and lifelong learning.

Introduction

Contemporary security challenges are increasingly shaped by interconnected environmental, economic, and social risks that cannot be addressed through state-centred or technocratic approaches alone. As communities face the impacts of climate change, food insecurity, economic exclusion, and social inequality, there is growing recognition that sustainable security depends on the active participation of citizens and the capacity of communities to anticipate, adapt to, and respond to change. This requires new approaches to security governance[1] that strengthen local agency, collective responsibility, and resilience.

Within this context, adult education has an important role to play. Moving beyond the transmission of technical knowledge or prescribed behaviours, critical adult education enables people to analyse their own realities, participate in collective decision-making, and develop locally appropriate responses to shared challenges. By fostering critical thinking, cooperation, and civic engagement, it contributes to more inclusive and participatory forms of security governance.

Drawing on the experience of DVV International Tunisia through the *Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards Rural Women's Economic Empowerment* (JP-RWEE) (Manai & Rassaa, 2025)[2], this article examines the extent to which critical adult education can contribute to a form of security governance based on civic participation, collective responsibility, and sustainable development. It argues that adult education should be understood not merely as a training tool, but as a mechanism of social transformation capable of strengthening the long-term capacity of citizens and communities to address contemporary security realities.

Rethinking security governance

As political, social, economic, and environmental crises become increasingly interconnected, security has moved to the forefront of development policy, particularly in African contexts. For many years, security policies were shaped primarily by technocratic, institutional, and state-centred approaches. Today, however, these approaches have proven insufficient to address the complexity of today's security realities. Security can no longer be understood solely as the responsibility of experts or state institutions; it increasingly depends on shared responsibility, civic participation, and collective action.

In this article, security governance is understood as the ways in which public authorities, civil society, and local communities work together to prevent and manage social, environmental, and economic risks. Grounded in human security and sustainable development, it emphasises collective resilience, cooperation, and locally driven responses rather than relying solely on crisis management and law enforcement (UNDRR, 2015)[3].

From this perspective, adult education grounded in a transformative approach[4] becomes a means of strengthening civic participation, enhancing citizens' agency, and building collective resilience. Rather than focusing solely on the transmission of knowledge, this approach encourages critical reflection, autonomy, and active engagement with the social, environmental, and security challenges that shape everyday life.

While numerous studies have highlighted the contribution of education to civic responsibility, social cohesion, and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2017), comparatively less attention has been paid to how participatory adult education initiatives may contribute to more inclusive and sustainable forms of community security governance, particularly in African contexts. The experience of DVV International Tunisia through the JP-RWEE provides an illuminating example of how adult education can contribute to social transformation and support community-based approaches to security governance.

The limitations of traditional approaches to security

For decades, security policies have been shaped primarily by technical, regulatory, and institution-centred approaches. Within these largely centralised models, decisions have been designed by experts and public authorities, while citizens' knowledge, lived experiences, and everyday concerns have played only a limited role. The growing complexity of economic, social, environmental, and public health crises has revealed the limitations of this approach, particularly in African contexts where multiple forms of vulnerability often overlap.

These developments call for a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between citizens and security governance. Rather than relying solely on public institutions for protection, people increasingly seek to participate in decisions that affect their lives and to contribute to locally appropriate solutions. The central question is therefore no longer simply how security can be delivered, but how it can be collectively shaped through cooperation, participation, and shared responsibility.

This shift raises important questions:

- How can security be reconciled with freedom, social justice, and equity?
- How can policy move beyond approaches centred on control and surveillance towards those that emphasise prevention, resilience, and civic participation?
- How can citizens become active contributors to security governance rather than passive recipients of public policies?

Addressing these questions requires a more democratic, inclusive, and locally grounded understanding of security governance.

The Tunisian context illustrates how security is understood through the interconnected dimensions of food security, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion. For many years, agricultural extension services relied on a top-down approach in which technical experts were seen as the primary source of knowledge, promoting standardised farming practices with limited consideration for local conditions or farmers' experience. The shortcomings of this technocratic model have become increasingly apparent. By promoting standardised solutions to highly diverse contexts, it has often marginalised knowledge developed through generations of local practice while limiting communities' ability to adapt to rapidly changing conditions driven by climate change, economic uncertainty, and wider social transformation. These limitations have created space for more participatory approaches that recognise local knowledge, collective learning, and community engagement as essential components of both sustainable development and security governance.

The role of adult education

Educational responses to security governance reflect broader debates about the purpose of education. This distinction is reflected in Vare and Scott's (2007) distinction between education that promotes predetermined behaviours and education that fosters critical inquiry. The former views education as the transmission of knowledge and prescribed practices that encourage compliance with established norms.

This transmissive model conceives learning as a linear, top-down process in which knowledge produced by 'experts' and institutions is transferred to learners to promote adherence to accepted rules, procedures, and behaviours. While effective for such things as disseminating technical information, it leaves limited space for critical reflection, local knowledge, adaptation, or citizens' lived experiences. This perspective resonates with Foucault's notion of *governmentality* (Laborier, 2014). From this viewpoint, security functions as a means of governing populations through institutions, expertise, and norms that shape how individuals understand and regulate their own conduct. Citizens are positioned primarily as subjects of governance rather than as active participants in defining and producing security.

By contrast, the transformative perspective conceives education as a process that enables learners to question, interpret, and respond to complex realities through dialogue, reflection, and collective inquiry. Drawing on Freire's (2021) conception of education as a practice of freedom, it rejects the 'banking model' of education and instead seeks to cultivate critical consciousness. Learning becomes a collaborative process through which people critically engage with their experiences, challenge dominant assumptions, and develop the capacity for democratic participation and collective action. Applied to security governance, this approach equips citizens not only to understand the structural causes of insecurity but also to participate in developing locally appropriate and sustainable responses.

This educational vision is inherently participatory. Adult learners are active partners rather than passive recipients of expert knowledge. Through dialogue, shared experience, and collaborative problem-solving, they connect new knowledge to the realities of everyday life while strengthening their capacity to act collectively. Civic education forms an important dimension of this process by promoting democratic participation, human rights, social responsibility, and awareness of the inequalities that often contribute to insecurity. Adult education for security governance therefore extends beyond knowledge acquisition to develop the

critical thinking, cooperation, conflict resolution, and decision-making skills needed to address social, economic, environmental, and digital risks.

This approach fundamentally redefines the relationship between learning and security. Rather than treating security as compliance with externally prescribed practices, it understands security as a collective capacity to interpret local realities, mobilise community knowledge and experience, and develop contextually appropriate and sustainable responses. Its effectiveness, however, depends on supportive institutional and community environments that enable learning to be translated into meaningful participation and collective action in security governance.

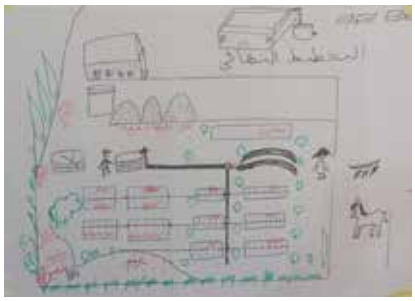
Learning from the JP-RWEE project

Within the JP-RWEE project, DVV International Tunisia developed training materials tailored to the needs of rural women and implemented training programmes for members of agricultural professional organisations (APOs). Rather than relying on conventional agricultural extension models based on one-way knowledge transfer, the organisation adopted a participatory learning approach rooted in local realities that recognised participants' experiential knowledge as a valuable resource (Manai & Rassaa, 2025). Trainers and learners become co-investigators, jointly analyse local challenges and develop context-specific responses. In doing so, the project strengthens participants' agency, encourages local cooperation, and reinforces community resilience by promoting collective practices of prevention, solidarity, and risk management. It demonstrates a form of security governance in which adult learning plays a key role by strengthening people's capacity to analyse problems, participate in decision-making, and collectively develop solutions.

The JP-RWEE project's training programmes foster learning across three complementary dimensions. First, participants acquire technical knowledge related to sustainable natural resource management and climate-resilient agricultural practices. Second, they develop socio-emotional competencies, including self-confidence, mutual trust, and the ability to work collectively. Third, these learning experiences are translated into action as participants become trainers within their own communities, sharing knowledge and supporting the emergence of new local learning networks.

The project's permaculture training programmes illustrate how this educational approach translates into practice. Grounded in observation, ecological understanding, and local adaptation, participants learn to analyse their own environments, assess soil and water conditions, and adapt agricultural practices to local ecological realities. In doing so, they strengthen their capacity not only to manage environmental risks and improve food and livelihood security, but also to participate more actively in decisions about the management of natural resources within their communities. Security therefore becomes a collaborative process of learning, deliberation, and collective action rather than a set of solutions delivered by external experts.

The project also draws on a semio-didactic approach (Manai & Rassaa, 2025)[5], supporting both the co-construction of knowledge and the transformation of social understandings. As participants develop greater autonomy and confidence, they also enhance their capacity to engage collectively in addressing the environmental, economic, and social challenges affecting their communities. The cascade training model extends these benefits beyond the initial participants. As participants became trainers within their own communities, knowledge spreads through local networks, strengthening relationships of trust, mutual support, and collective learning (Manai & Rassaa, 2025).



Conceptual map developed by participants during permaculture training in Sidi M'hammed (Jendouba), illustrating the co-construction of knowledge through the semio-didactic approach and their growing capacity for independent reflection, collective planning, and shared decision-making

The JP-RWEE project therefore demonstrates how adult education can contribute to participatory and locally grounded security governance. Security is no longer understood as compliance with externally prescribed practices, but as a collective capacity to understand local contexts, mobilise experiential and local knowledge, participate in decision-making, and develop responses that are both sustainable and locally appropriate. Through this process, adult learning becomes a driver of resilience, cooperation, and community ownership of security and development.

The rural, mountainous environment of Sidi M'hammed (Jendouba), where the participants live

Conclusion

The increasing complexity of contemporary crises highlights the limitations of security policies that rely predominantly on technocratic and institution-centred responses. In a context characterised by interconnected environmental, social, and economic risks, security can no longer be understood solely as the responsibility of public institutions. It

must also be conceived as a collective endeavour, sustained by civic participation, shared responsibility, and the capacity of communities to respond to change.

This article has argued that critical adult education represents a key driver of this transformation. By strengthening citizens' agency, fostering critical reflection, and promoting collaborative learning, it contributes to forms of security governance that are more participatory, inclusive, and resilient. Rather than treating citizens as passive beneficiaries of public policies, it recognises them as active contributors to the production of security and sustainable development.

The JP-RWEE project provides compelling empirical support for this argument. Through participatory learning, the recognition of local and experiential knowledge, and the cascade training model, the project demonstrates how educational practice can strengthen both individual and collective capacities. Participants emerge not only with new technical competencies but also with greater confidence, stronger social networks, and an enhanced ability to act collectively to address environmental, economic, and social issues within their communities.

More broadly, the findings invite us to reconsider the place of adult education within contemporary debates on security governance. Rather than serving merely as an instrument for skills development or a component of development policy, adult education is a democratic practice that strengthens citizens' capacity to understand complex risks, act collectively, and shape more inclusive and resilient communities. Contemporary security challenges therefore require a renewed vision of adult education - one that moves beyond the transmission of knowledge and prescribed behaviours to support the development of active citizens capable of contributing to sustainable, participatory, and locally grounded forms of security governance.

Future research could usefully examine the long-term impact of participatory adult education initiatives on security governance, social cohesion, and sustainable development in African contexts and beyond. Such work would deepen our understanding of how educational processes contribute to building societies that are not only more secure, but also more just, inclusive, adaptive, and resilient.

References/Further reading

Freire, P. (2023). *La pédagogie des opprimés* (É. Dupau & M. Kerhoas, Trad.) Agone.

Laborier, P. (2014). Gouvernementalité. In J.-F. Bert & J. Lamy (Eds.), *Michel Foucault, un héritage critique* (pp. 169-181). CNRS Éditions.

Manai, M., & Rassaa, K. (2025). Les femmes se mobilisent, les communautés avancent : Le programme conjoint « Accélérer les progrès vers l'autonomisation économique des femmes rurales ». *Le Journal MOJA pour l'Éducation des Adultes*, 3, 23-26.

ONU/UNDRR. (2015). *Cadre de Sendai pour la réduction des risques de catastrophe 2015-2030*. Nations Unies.

UNESCO. (2017). *L'Éducation en vue des Objectifs de développement durable : Objectifs d'apprentissage*. UNESCO.

Vare, P., & Scott, W. (2007). Learning for a change: Exploring the relationship between education and sustainable development. *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development, 1*(2), 191-198. https://doi.org/10.1177/097340820700100209

Endnotes

1 The concept of human security shifted attention from protecting states to protecting people, emphasizing that security includes economic, social, environmental, and political dimensions (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994). Building on this perspective, security system governance highlights that effective security depends not only on state institutions but also on accountability, participation, and collaboration among governments, civil society, and communities (OECD, 2023).

2 See Manai, M., & Rassaa, K. (2025). Women rising up, communities moving forward: The Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards Rural Women's Economic Empowerment. *MOJA Journal of Adult Education (3).*

3 The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (adopted at the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan, on 18 March 2015), outlines seven clear targets and four priorities for action to prevent new and reduce existing disaster risks: (i) Understanding disaster risk; (ii) Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk; (iii) Investing in disaster reduction for resilience and; (iv) Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response, and to "Build Back Better" in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

4 Developed by educator Jack Mezirow, transformative learning theory explains how adults draw on new experiences to question and revise their deeply rooted assumptions, beliefs, and frames of reference.

5 The semio-didactic approach (also referred to as the semiotic approach to didactics) combines insights from semiotics (the study of signs, symbols, and meaning-making) and didactics (the theory and practice of teaching and learning). It recognises that learning is a process of co-constructing meaning through signs, symbols, and representations. Rather than simply receiving information, learners actively interpret and make sense of knowledge within their own cultural, social, and linguistic contexts.