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SDGs and Education

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Executive Summary

The 17 SDGs adopted by the United Nations in 2015 constitute a significant step up in scale and ambition in that they apply to all nations, whether developed or developing. Actions to achieve the Goals are demanding and education is seen as central.

It is expressly important as SDG 4, which commits nations to 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. Targets and indicators indicate more specifically the broad intent behind this Goal.

The paper celebrates the inclusion of lifelong learning within the education goal and that it gives recognition to the contributions of formal, non-formal and informal education sectors. The paper also highlights the importance of a rights-based approach to education. It draws attention to several tensions which are apparent in the delivery of this goal arising from narrow measures of attainment and conceptual tensions around the scope and role of educational programmes.

Educational policy faces challenges over the broadening-out of education provision from an over-emphasis on school-based education to include the community contribution, and over the provision of sufficient financial resources.

The UN's Global Agenda

The adoption of the SDGs by the United Nations in September 2015 was the outcome of a very extensive process of debate and consultation over several years. The agreement on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), each of which was linked with up to a dozen targets and a raft of indicators, was an extraordinary achievement. The SDGs follow on from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and from Education for All (EFA) which had set out a program to be achieved between 2000 and 2015.

The SDGs constitute a significant step up in scale and are much more ambitious in that they apply to all nations, whether developed or developing. The financing of action to achieve the

targets is demanding, and the extent to which the Goals imply dramatic change in our existing political and economic structures and processes.

The Importance of Education

In all of this, education is central. It is expressly important as SDG 4, which commits nations to 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. Targets and indicators indicate more specifically the broad intent behind this Goal.

However, Education is integral to the achievement of all of the 17 Goals. The delivery of the UN's Global Agenda depends on a fundamental shift in people's knowledge about the broad range of issues implicit in the Goals, and in their willingness to act. Education must play a key role in this process.

Lifelong learning

Securing a single education goal within the global development goals been a cause for celebration, but the specific acknowledgement of lifelong learning as the overarching goal was a further achievement. This was because often, the emphasis placed on any education goal would be on the education of children and youth, in other words, schooling, as evidenced by the selection of Universal Primary Education (UPE) within the MDGs. Lifelong learning as the global education goal has opened the opportunity to advocate for education at all stages of life, often described as from cradle to grave.

Furthermore, not only have the education targets identified the different education sectors, including early childhood care and education (ECCE), primary, secondary and tertiary education, vocational education and training, and youth and adult education; but the targets have also recognised the important contributions of formal, non-formal and informal education.

Reaffirming commitment to a rights-based approach

A further cause for celebration is the explicit acknowledgement of education as a right, as enshrined in the [Universal Declaration on Human Rights](#) (UDHR 1948), which was a contentious approach throughout the EFA period, with civil society organisations, advocating for a stronger statement on education as a right. A central framework that guided the development of educational initiatives and advocacy was the [Tomasevski (2001) 4A's Framework](#) – that education must be Available, Accessible, Adaptable and Acceptable. The 4A s Framework was developed by Katarina Tomaševski, the first UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education, and adopted by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its [General Comment 13 on the right to education](#) (1999: para.6).

However, despite the growing consensus in human rights instruments and political commitments by many stakeholders, including governments, we still have a long way to go to realizing the full implementation and achievement of the right to education that is at the

heart of SDG 4. The Right to Education (RTE) and UNESCO has prepared The Right to Education Handbook (2019) an action-oriented guide to assist in ensuring the full compliance to the right to education.

Debates and Challenges

Despite this achievement of a single, holistic and rights-based education goal, a number of key debates and challenges continue to overshadow and at times threaten the achievement of SDG4. It is these debates and challenges that we, who are committed to the achievement of the full global education goal, are continuing to monitor and advocate for.

Narrow measurement of educational achievements and jobs

One key difference between the SDGs and the MDGs has been a greater effort in identifying not just relevant targets but even more specific indicators to help measure success. It responded to the lessons learned from the MDGs such as the "lack of clarity or inconsistencies among goals and indicators, as well as insufficient financial and technical support to improve national monitoring systems" (GAML 2017: 2). Significant effort and resources went into this phase of the planning, that some stakeholders have observed that, there was very little new resources left to implement the desired change.

The other observation has been that many of the education indicators that were identified were indicators that were already being collected, mostly through the current global education measurement initiatives. While there is value in utilising existing measures based on internationally accepted methods and standard, there is also a counter argument that current measurements are too narrowly focused on 'testing' and measuring learning outcomes, without acknowledging the other factors that contribute to meaningful education. Mair et.al. (2017:2) in their critical analysis of the SDG indicators have argued that "indicators are reductionist analytical tools and their use risks oversimplification." They further argue that such uncritical use of indicators "can lead to policies and strategies that focus on what is measurable rather than addressing less tangible or measurable issues" (Mair et.al. 2017:3).

Therefore, there are counter-arguments for the need to be open to a set of 'emergent' indicators, that are supportive of the learning goals of the SDGs, around working more collaboratively across disciplinary silos, an emphasis on what has been called 'soft skills', rather than the testing of learning outcomes. In addition, there has also been arguments against the narrow indicator of successful education being measured based on securing a job.

Conceptual Tensions

While sustainable development has always been defined in terms of the integration of the social, economic and environmental dimensions of society, with the recognition of these dimensions being embedded within a cultural and political context, the current era of neo-liberalism has continued to emphasise a focus on the economic imperatives, often at the expense of the other dimensions.

There has also been a continued emphasis on an instrumental objective of education, to secure jobs and contribute to the economic life of society. While we recognise that work is an

important part of a meaningful life, arguments have been raised with regards the more humanistic purpose of education as was identified by the Faure (1972) and the Delors Reports (1996). Furthermore, education advocates have advanced the argument for the need to ensure that it is not about just securing any job, but that the job is clean, decent and meaningful.

Working as an environmental educator in local community settings in the Asia-Pacifichas demonstrated how climate change helps to advance an awareness of the global scale of environmental problems. No longer can environmental problems be understood and recognised as merely local problems that needs to be addressed at the local level, but it is important to understand the global factors that contribute to the symptoms and the solutions. Furthermore, climate change cannot be solely understood as an environmental problem, but it has been demonstrated how climate change is as much an economic problem that is greatly influenced by political power. It is this understanding of the complex and interconnected nature of these problems, like climate change, or more appropriately climate emergency, that requires not just more education, but a different kind of education and learning.

While current education curriculum policy frameworks have acknowledged the importance of both environment and sustainability as a cross-cutting concerns, the subject-specific and discipline-based curriculum continues to be a key hurdle that needs to be overcome. This same siloed approach replicates itself in our government structures, where the offices responsible for the environment and education are often isolated from each other.

Local and Global Tensions

However, not only are the tensions linked to the different dimensions of the economic, social, environmental, cultural and political, but given that the SDGs are meant to be universal goals, there are also emerging tensions with regards to local and global commitments, that arise from the education goal. In Australia, one of the on-going tensions has been the government's commitment to resourcing education both in Australia and in its Overseas Development Aid (ODA) programs.

The Australian Coalition for Education and Development (ACED) Spotlight Report (2019) that was launched in May 2019 has highlighted the need for a more equitable allocation of resources within the Australian education system. (ACED 2019: 10). Amidst this call for more equitable domestic funding of education, Australia has been a long-standing contributor to education aid to developing countries. However, the ACED report has also identified how Australia has moved from being one of the most generous contributors the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) in earlier years to currently not even being in the top 10 donors to the GPE (Australian Aid Tracker). The government argues that in addition to its contribution to the GPE, there is bilateral education aid that is directly allocated to countries. However, as the ACED report argues, much of this bilateral education aid, around 50% is actually allocated to scholarships, which while contributing to human resources development in the respective countries, are funds that are spent back in Australia (ACED 2019: 37).

Lack of resources and the Private Sector

The lack of resources, specifically from governments, who from a rights-based approach is the primary duty bearer for education delivery, has opened the door for the entry of the private sector in education delivery. While the private sector has always been a key delivery mechanism of education in many countries, there has been a long-standing critique of how wealth determines the quality of education that one can purchase, as often private schools are better resources compared to state/public schools. While the contribution of the private sector to education is important, the argument that is being made by some governments and civil society organisations, is the need to be vigilant with regards the impact of the privatisation of education and the impact on quality education, employment of low-skilled teachers, cost and outcomes. (See [ASPBAE 2017, The Privatisation Trap: A Policy Review of Education Privatisation in the Asia Pacific Region](#)).

Civil Society

Civil society has continued to be an active actor in the education space, most often recognised for the contribution to complementing the education gaps in the country. There is debate that questions, how different this is from the private sector filling in the gap? Many have argued that as a temporary mechanism, this is an important support mechanism. But in the end, the focus of CSOs should be the ensure that the government is delivering on its commitment to education as a right.

It is this role, that has often put civil society organisation at loggerheads with governments in a number of countries, where CSOs have played an active role in advocating for education as a right and the need for a more equitable, accessible and relevant education system. In some countries, this has resulted in education advocates having been arrested.

Policy and Practice Implications

The fundamental policy implication of this perspective is that a lifelong and lifewide approach to education policy is an essential element of an overall approach to not just achieving progress on the 17 SDGs, but also recognising the underlying call for global transformation. This in itself is a demanding objective as so much of global debate about education is focused particularly on children, and on school participation. While school participation remains a necessary foundation for so many aspects of transformation, it is not sufficient. It might be regarded as the immediate priority, but a narrow focus on schooling misses immense opportunities to broaden the education framework.

Some of this is apparent in the work on family or intergenerational learning. In general terms, most people learn more in informal or nonformal education context, whether that is the family, sports clubs, cultural associations or workplace settings. As a key element of the policy formation process, education policy needs to work closely with those who conduct labour and employment, cultural and social policy planning to ensure that there is an alignment of these policy frameworks.

One other key issue that cannot be neglected is that of financing. From a policy perspective, advocates need to challenge the notion that governments do not have enough funds to

provide for the education needs of the country. Studies have highlighted the importance of more effective and efficient collection of taxes and the need to address corruption as key mechanisms to increase government funds that can be made available to education. This will continue to be a crucial policy issue.

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