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Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world: Contribution to the HLPF July 2017 session Education and Academia Stakeholder Group

Summary

Education is the most sustainable, long-term driver to increase prosperity, and to end poverty for good. Most of the goals reviewed this year by the High-level Political Forum rely on education for their realisation; similarly, poverty, hunger, poor health, gender discrimination and climate-related disasters are detrimental to the realisation of SDG4.

Free, quality education breaks cycles of poverty and exclusion, making SDG4's commitment to universal, free, primary and secondary education vital. A 12% cut in global poverty could be achieved if all students in low-income countries have basic reading skills. Education addresses discrimination against women and girls, and when women are educated, nutrition, food security, child health and mortality are improved. If all women complete primary school, maternal deaths would decrease by two thirds.

To implement the agenda, cross-sectoral relationships and interrelated policy-making are necessary – in line with Goal 17. Education civil society has recognised this; networks have broadened, and cross-sectoral dialogues are achieving positive change.

Progress has been witnessed on the establishment of focal points for SDG implementation in some countries, along with efforts to align SDG targets with national policies. It is clear that the global infrastructure developed to support the 2000-2015 Education For All goals and the subsequent Education 2030 Framework for Action have facilitated ongoing monitoring of SDG4 through the Global Education Monitoring Report and the swift establishment of accountability mechanisms, including the Education 2030 Steering Committee.

Yet obstacles exist – particularly in a context of protracted and deepening crises, and increasingly insular government policy. SDG financing has proven challenging. To deliver SDG4, domestic budgets remain insufficient and reductions in ODA have not helped. Domestic resource mobilisation should be a priority, yet there is reluctance from the international community to create mechanisms to support increases to domestic resource bases – for example by establishing a global tax platform. A combination of increased domestic resources, tax justice at national and international levels and increased international cooperation are necessary to make the implementation of the agenda viable.

Despite the participatory climate in which the SDGs were developed, doors have since closed to civil society; activists report aggressive action to limit civil society activity, including restrictions on funding and protest, even direct criminalisation. Citizens must have a voice in the decision-making process – as embedded in the SDGs themselves. A further challenge lies in the measurement and accountability processes. The global indicators framework is not yet finalised, delaying the collection of stronger, disaggregated data which is critical to ensuring that the SDGs deliver for the most marginalised. Civil society can contribute here, with citizen-collected data. However, several proposed

education indicators are reducing the agenda to measures of testing, which fails the ambition of SDG4 to deliver quality education, and of all the SDGs to ensure that everyone enjoys fulfilling lives.

These obstacles impede delivery of the goals, and in education this has given rise to increasing privatisation in some countries with reports of for-profit actors taking advantage of gaps in public provision, undermining the responsibility of the state as the duty bearer for the 2030 agenda.

While some progress has been witnessed, there is a sense that it is 'business as usual'. This agenda is too important to fail; two years in, it is time to deliver.

Recommendations include:

- Credible roadmaps must be developed for each SDG; for SDG4 these must explicitly provide for education which is of quality, equitable, inclusive and free.
- States must deliver their responsibility to finance the SDGs; for SDG4 this should be as detailed within the Education 2030 Framework for Action.
- Citizen participation in accountability at all levels must be enabled.
- VNRs should include formal space for representative national civil society reporting.

Full contribution

Education is the most sustainable and long-term solution to poverty, and offers the greatest chance to realise prosperity. It is critical to the fulfilment of all other rights and underpins the sustainable development agenda; specifically, most of the targets reviewed this year by the High-level Political Forum rely on education for their realisation. At the same time, poverty, hunger, poor health, gender discrimination and natural disasters resulting from climate change are detrimental to the realisation of SDG4 – such is the interrelated, indivisible nature of the agenda.

Education is the main driver to increase prosperity, and to end poverty for good. The Global Education Monitoring Report has found that 171 million people could be lifted out of poverty if all students in low-income countries left school with basic reading skills. This is the equivalent of a 12% cut in global poverty. Further, individual and national prosperity can be boosted by just one extra year of schooling: an individual's earnings can increase by up to 10% and annual GDP by 0.37%.

Free, quality education breaks cycles of poverty and exclusion. A major lesson from the Millennium Development Goals was that the abolition of tuition fees is an extremely effective policy for making education more accessible and equitable. It directly facilitates access and completion for girls and children in poverty, who risk losing out on education when families struggling to cover the costs are forced to choose which child to educate. Implementing Target 4.1. on free, quality, primary and secondary education must be a priority for governments. Free education means free of tuition fees as well as indirect costs (uniforms, school meals, materials).

Education improves nutrition and food security – when women are educated. This in turn increases child mortality rates and income. Children of educated mothers are also more likely to be vaccinated, and less likely to be stunted because of malnourishment, and if all women complete primary school this would reduce maternal deaths by two thirds. This again demonstrates the deep interrelatedness of the agenda.

Indeed, gender is a cross-cutting concern. Education is key to addressing discrimination against all women and girls, ensuring empowerment, addressing patriarchy and overcoming structural barriers that prevent the full participation of women. Similarly, education for both men and women is vital to reverse violent practices explicitly referenced in Goal 5's targets, including trafficking, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation. Sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls are vital to supporting education.

Quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, which promotes human well-being as demanded by Goal 9, is reliant on an educated workforce. At the same time, a major barrier to realising quality education is a lack of infrastructure for its delivery.

Knowledge of global issues, education for sustainable development and for global citizenship, and making citizens more environment-conscious contribute to Goal 14, to support the sustainable management and protection of marine and coastal ecosystems.

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Aspects of importance to education within Goal 17 include strengthening domestic resource mobilisation, development cooperation and multi-stakeholder partnerships, increasing access to science and technology, enhancing capacity-building to support national SDG implementation plans and developing measures of progress beyond GDP. To fully implement the agenda, cross-sectoral relationships and interrelated policy-making are necessary – in line with the overall intention of Goal 17.

Education civil society working in partnership

The education civil society movement has recognised the criticality of joint working; at national, regional and global levels, networks have developed and broadened. Education networks are increasingly seeking out opportunities to participate in multi-sectoral platforms, while also inviting organisations from different sectors to participate in dialogue and joint action, which is yielding results. Cross-sectoral dialogues have been initiated which are already achieving positive change. In Bangladesh, civil society campaigned for and supported the delivery of strengthened school feeding programmes to end classroom hunger, and health education programmes in schools – including sexual and reproductive health. In climate-vulnerable countries including Papua New Guinea and Sri Lanka, education campaigners work closely with environmental NGOs to ensure children and adults have access to education for sustainable development, and to raise awareness of climate change, environmental preservation and food security. Gender equality has long been integrated with education campaigning, particularly on issues such as child marriage and school-related gender-based violence – with much work being done on the latter by actors in the Latin America region this year. Similarly, civil society networks and organisations representing persons with disabilities are deeply embedded within the education community and have been instrumental in pushing for inclusive education systems.

Observations on progress of the SDGs

Progress has been witnessed on fundamental aspects of the implementation of the SDGs. Nationally, focal points for SDG implementation – such as ministerial departments and lead persons – are slowly being established in some countries. However, other reports suggest that the SDGs are not necessarily fully understood or owned by those departments responsible for their delivery or oversight, or that there has been selective interpretation by member States, leading to poor implementation which deviates from the understanding of the SDGs. Similarly, where SDG coordination mechanisms are being set up, these can be weak and lack the authority to monitor, or enforce cooperation from other departments. They can also lack transparency.

Globally, the establishment of formal participatory, monitoring, and accountability processes for the SDGs has helped spur action on follow-up of the SDGs. The High-level Political Forum provides a convening moment to report progress on the SDGs, and civil society with an opportunity to engage in national-level advocacy to drive accountability. UNDESA, as the UN lead on SDG coordination at the country level, has served as a useful awareness-raising platform and has provided opportunities for governments to begin SDG planning.

There seem to be efforts to align SDG targets with national policies, for education and other SDGs, and education activists are taking the initiative to accelerate this by providing forward-thinking proposals to governments and raising awareness of the SDGs with citizens. Two different examples are from the Dominican Republic, where the national education coalition has provided information to teachers and students on how SDG4 aligns with the national education sector plan; and from India, where teachers' unions are working with the national education coalition to hold the government accountable for excluding marginalised citizens from participating in debates and decision-making on the implementation of SDG4.

It is also clear that the global infrastructure developed to support the 2000-2015 Education For All goals and the subsequent Education 2030 Framework for Action have enabled ongoing monitoring of SDG4 through the Global Education Monitoring Report and the swift establishment of accountability mechanisms, including the Education 2030 Steering Committee. However, there have also been threats to established and effective mechanisms, with proposals being put to the UN for their replacement by new fora, which are neither democratic nor representative, and do not afford space to broad-based civil society.

What is preventing implementation?

Obstacles have also been encountered. It is difficult to ignore that the last year has seen protracted and deepening crises, and – in the wake of several national elections – increasingly insular government policy.

Financing of the SDGs has proven challenging. To deliver SDG4, it is necessary to increase significantly investments in the foundational elements of quality education: qualified teachers, and safe learning environments. However, domestic budgets remain insufficient to provide these and other public services of quality – and reductions in ODA have not helped. A combination of increased domestic resources, tax justice at national and international levels and increased international cooperation are necessary to make the implementation of the agenda truly viable.

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Domestic resource mobilisation should be a priority for every State – not only to achieve the goals, but to do so in a sustainable way. Yet there has been reluctance from the international community to create mechanisms to support or encourage governments to increase their domestic resource bases – for example by establishing a global tax platform. It should also be acknowledged that there was no commitment to financing the SDGs within the Addis Ababa Action Agenda. This oversight must be rectified. Developing countries must expand their domestic tax base (to at least 20% of GDP), and for education, increase the share of spending on this sector (to at least 20% of budgets), progressing to 6% of GDP, and ensuring resources are closely scrutinised and spent sensitively to improve the effectiveness, efficiency and equitability of public education systems. At the international level, additional efforts are needed to support reforms to domestic tax systems and to develop a globally inclusive inter-governmental body that is empowered and resourced to set and enforce fair global tax rules.

ODA had already stagnated before the launch of the SDGs, and it has since dropped. Indeed, almost immediately after the SDGs were confirmed, the then-chair of the UN General Assembly, Denmark, announced a large-scale reduction in its ODA. In Norway and the Netherlands, monies have been shifted from ODA budgets to national budgets, which has been justified by the influx of refugees arriving predominantly from the Middle-East. Education civil society strongly recommends that bilateral donors increase ODA (towards 0.7% global target), commit at least 30 percent of their education aid to support multilateral efforts (such as the Global Partnership for Education), and ensure they are supporting the countries and populations most in need.

Despite the participatory climate in which the SDGs were developed, reports have been received that doors have been closed to civil society. Campaigners have reported aggressive action to limit civil society activity, including restrictions on funding, political activity, and protest, even direct criminalisation. Citizens must have a voice in any decision-making process which impacts on their lives – this is embedded in the SDGs themselves, and States must be held to account when citizens are denied this.

An ongoing challenge lies in the measurement and accountability processes. The global indicators framework has yet to be finalised which, among other impacts, is delaying the collection of stronger and disaggregated data. This is so crucial to ensuring that the SDGs are delivering, particularly for the most marginalised. Civil society can contribute here, with community-based, citizen-collected data.

Several of the proposed education indicators – at all levels – are reducing the agenda to measures of testing. This links to a much broader obstacle in delivering SDG4: the erosion of the defined and agreed vision of quality, inclusive and free education. The 2015 World Education Forum in Incheon, Korea, defined quality education as one that *"fosters creativity and knowledge, and ensures the acquisition of the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy as well as analytical, problem-solving and other high-level cognitive, interpersonal and social skills. It also develops the skills, values and attitudes that enable citizens to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, make informed decisions, and respond to local and global challenges…"*. The Education 2030 Framework for Action further states: *"This requires relevant teaching and learning methods and content that meet the needs of all learners, taught by well-qualified, trained, adequately remunerated and motivated teachers, using appropriate pedagogical approaches and supported by appropriate information and communication technology (ICT), as well as the creation of safe, healthy, gender-responsive, inclusive and adequately resourced environments that facilitate learning."* States have committed to delivering this definition of quality education, yet the diminishment of the role and voice of critical actors in education, such as teachers, the reduction in financing, and an overemphasis on testing, all pose threats to this. The more reductive global indicators for SDG4 fail its ambition to deliver quality education, and fail the ambition of all the SDGs to ensure that everyone enjoys fulfilling lives.

Challenges specific to civil society include CSO engagement in the global north being patchy, especially on domestic commitments, while in the south CSOs are facing contradictions in terms of involvement. While ground is seemingly gained in participatory regional fora, simultaneously civil society is being squeezed out of national decision-making processes. Civil society working nationally on individual goals has found itself marginalised during SDG accountability spaces, which has been the case for education activists in several Voluntary National Review countries this year. While consultation processes are underway, there are concerns that they are frequently token. Although governments agreed to work with civil society with on planning and implementation of SDG4 at international level, civil society frequently does not have adequate space to engage in planning, monitoring and evaluation processes nationally. The available, yet limited, opportunities are often acquired by international organisations and large-scale NGOs.

These obstacles are slowing down delivery, and in education this has given rise to increasing privatisation in some countries. Specifically, civil society groups report that for-profit actors are taking advantage of gaps in public provision, establishing and expanding chains of 'low-fee' private schools, sometimes with the support of local or national governments. This plainly contradicts

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the commitment in Target 4.1 to the provision of free and universal education, and undermines and diminishes the responsibility of the state as the duty bearer for the 2030 agenda.

Strengthening accountability for SDG implementation

The 2030 Agenda is too important to fail, yet two years after States committed to its delivery, major challenges are impeding progress. While some positive observations have been made, and civil society is working towards implementation, there is a sense that it is 'business as usual'.

The Education and Academia Stakeholder Group makes the following recommendations to accelerate SDG implementation:

National level:
- Credible roadmaps, fully financed, with clear mechanisms for accountability to citizens must be developed, and SDGs must be integrated into national plans, sector strategies and budgets.
- States must deliver their responsibility to finance the SDGs; for education, the targets of 6% of GDP/20% of domestic budget must be met in developing countries as detailed in the Education 2030 Framework for Action, and donor countries must increase ODA (towards 0.7% global target), committing at least 30% of their education aid to support multilateral efforts.
- Donor countries should align their bilateral funding priorities with recipient countries' development plans and budgets during SDG implementation. Alignment should be driven by a collective vision that includes all stakeholders, and the process of planning and policy change should be participative, inclusive and transparent.
- Public institutions must be strengthened and empowered to deliver the agenda in an inclusive, transparent and participatory manner:
  - o National coordination mechanisms could be established, or existing mechanisms could be tasked with the responsibility to strengthen inter-agency, inter-ministerial and/or cross-departmental work. This should include formal spaces for engagement of civil society.
  - o For education, education ministries must be involved and empowered, and in countries where a Local Education Group exists, it could serve as the representative body with multi-stakeholder participation on education, and should be connected to the SDG architecture.
  - o Existing accountability institutions (independent national human rights institutions, parliaments and audit institutions) should be mandated to monitor government progress towards the SDGs, with input from and the participation of citizens.
- Conduct regular and participative reviews, irrespective of whether the country is participating in the VNR process. Governments should seek the views of groups that are the furthest behind and provide modalities for meaningful input and participation. Information about upcoming reviews/outcomes should be published in a timely manner and accessible formats, including in local languages.
- Provide an enabling environment for citizens to participate in accountability processes. Governments must guarantee the rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly and access to information in law and practice. Mechanisms to build awareness and mobilise popular support for the SDG agenda would strengthen social accountability.

Regional level:
- Regional deliberations should be open and transparent, and reflect the modalities adopted for the HLPF, enabling the formal participation of civil society across each goal. CSO participation must be meaningful and contribute to a culture of collaboration.
- Regional accountability tools and mechanisms, such as regional observatories, peer review, or other measures to track progress, identify gaps, challenges and lessons learned should be established and supported.
- Links with existing rights-based regional governance frameworks and regional human rights mechanisms should be strengthened, with inputs from these bodies incorporated into the regional review process.
- For education, take advantage of the existing, UNESCO-led Education 2030 regional review process by building a formal link with the SDG follow-up and review processes.

Global level:

- Provide greater technical support to governments to improve monitoring and accountability processes.
- Strengthen the process of VNRs as the mainstay of the follow-up and review process, and include formal space for representative national civil society and MGoS to submit alternative reports as part of the VNR. MGoS inputs should also be considered during the negotiations for the HLPF Ministerial Declaration.
- Strengthen coordination among MGoS to ensure more inclusive, cross-sectoral responses by civil society.
- International bodies must use their influence to make governments more responsive in engagement of civil society in planning, implementation, and monitoring of SDG goals.

- International bodies must also use their influence to realise greater financial commitments from governments for all SDGs, including support for increased domestic resource mobilisation.

Indicators and data systems for accountability

- National data systems should be strengthened to enable regular reporting and ensure that data collected is disaggregated, accessible and in the public domain. Governments should set national interim equity targets for specific groups and commit necessary financial, technical and capacity resources to ensure an appropriate level of disaggregation.
- National indicators should support, and not digress from, global and thematic indicator frameworks.