

Equitable Learning for All in the Post-2015 Development Agenda

Education is both a right and the bedrock of development. The dividends that result from investments in education are immeasurable: greater economic growth for individuals and societies; improved public health; and safer, more stable communities. However, for these benefits to accrue, all girls and boys must have education opportunities both in and outside of school and be *learning*.

Over the past fifteen years, thanks in large part to the second Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of universal primary education, major advances have been made in enrolling millions of children worldwide.¹ However, despite significant progress in getting more girls and boys into school, those gains have been uneven, and learning levels remain unacceptably low. Too often children leave both primary and secondary levels without acquiring the basic knowledge, skills, and competencies they need to lead productive, healthy lives and to attain sustainable livelihoods. In addition, economic, gender and ethnic disparities, and factors such as conflict and disability, still prevent millions of girls and boys from even attending school.

There is a global learning crisis, which is hitting the poorest, most marginalized children and youth particularly hard. According to estimates in the 2012 EFA Global Monitoring Report:²

- Approximately 120 million children either never make it to school or drop out before their fourth year;
- In 123 low and middle income countries almost 200 million youth have not completed primary education, 58% of these are female; and
- At least 250 million primary-school-age children around the world are not able to read, write or count well enough to meet minimum learning standards, including girls and boys who have spent at least four years in school.

Worse still, we may not know the full extent of the learning crisis as these figures are likely to be a gross underestimate, given that many countries do not measure basic reading or arithmetic in primary grades.³ Poor, rural girls in particular face multiple disadvantages through gender discrimination and poverty which bar them from enrolling and lead to dropouts at greater rates than boys.⁴

Learning and education are inter-related but not the same. Learning is an outcome, and one that is an essential, lifelong foundation. Education generally refers to the system responsible for ensuring that all girls and boys have the opportunity to learn these essential skills. Focusing on learning outcomes pulls in other sectors and actors, such as early childhood nutrition and health workers, or the role of parents and community members in teaching children and youth. A quality education system, particularly for the most marginalized, can help mitigate other disadvantages a child might face and is essential for ensuring all children have the opportunity to learn. Therefore, a focus on both learning outcomes and quality education are critical for the post-2015 development agenda.

Equitable learning – ensuring equitable opportunities to learn for the disadvantaged and advantaged alike – is essential to reap the many benefits of education. Equipping girls and boys from a very young age with a quality education can lead to lifelong learning that enables children, youth and adults to continually build their knowledge, skills, and competencies to survive and thrive. Despite overall progress in reducing the number of out-of-school children over the last

two decades, progress has actually stalled in the last three years.⁵ At least 64% of children worldwide have no access to pre-school programs⁶ and there are still 61 million children of primary school age and another 71 million of lower secondary school age out of school.⁷ Furthermore, progress has been highly inequitable: over half of all out-of-school children are in sub-Saharan Africa, girls are more likely to be out of school than boys, and children from the poorest quintile are four times more likely to be out of school than children from the richest quintile of households. Ensuring universal access to early childhood, primary and secondary education remains a major challenge, especially for the most marginalized.⁸

Once enrolled in school, data show that learning levels – not necessarily years in school – are what drive many social and economic returns on investments in education.⁹ Empirical studies provide robust evidence that it is the acquisition of knowledge and skills (cognitive and behavioral), rather than schooling, that promotes employability, productivity, and growth. For a major part of the world's population, however, education systems fall far short of these expectations. Poor quality education and unsafe school environments are jeopardizing the future of millions of young people across high-, medium- and low-income countries alike.¹⁰ In shaping education for the future, efforts to expand enrollment, retention and completion at all levels must be accompanied by policies to enhance educational quality and ensure safe and enabling learning environments at all levels in formal and in non-formal settings.¹¹ And learning outcomes must be measured.¹²

It comes as no surprise that the poorest and most marginalized children often have fewer learning materials, fewer opportunities to learn outside school, and teachers with the least training. They also lack parent-teacher-student associations even though parental and community involvement in schools and education are important elements in improving learning outcomes. Furthermore, the most marginalized children are also less likely to benefit from good early childhood services, despite strong evidence that they help ensure girls and boys learn and succeed throughout their lives. While all of these influences on children's learning are important, it is critical that there is continued focus on understanding what works to improve learning.

Education and learning play a fundamental role in achieving broader development goals. Recent research suggests that the interaction between education and other sectors can help achieve our global development goals more cost-effectively. For example, greater learning achievement has an impact on accessing decent work, combating disease, participating in society and raising healthy families. A child born to a mother who can read stands a 50% greater chance of surviving past age five.¹³ Children of better-educated parents are more likely to go to school and to receive regular health checks. Girls with several years of quality education have lower maternal and infant mortality rates, improved reproductive health, better management of environmental resources and greater economic productivity. Furthermore, for girls in particular, every year of schooling beyond the fourth grade increases individual wages by as much as 20%.¹⁴

Education also plays a vital role in developing sustainable communities. Educating children on disasters and climate in a child-friendly school environment can reduce their vulnerability to risk while contributing to sustainable development for their communities.¹⁵ And educating girls and women is one of the best ways of strengthening community adaptation to climate change.¹⁶ A quality education enables individuals and communities to take greater control of the circumstances of their lives and to shape, rather than merely endure, the changes that affect them.¹⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the role that quality education and learning play in empowering people to make informed decisions that impact their families' well-being and equip them with the skills to live secure and healthy lives, the post-2015 development agenda must include education as a cross-cutting issue that effects all development goals. In addition to being cross-cutting in the post-2015 agenda, there must also be an explicit education goal focused on *learning for all*.

A number of proposals have been written by organizations around the globe on how education should be featured in the post-2015 framework.¹⁸ Across these proposals, and through ongoing global and regional consultations, there is widespread agreement from both the global north and south on the importance of three areas to the post-2015 agenda: equity, learning, and the need for a learning continuum from early childhood through to adolescence.

These three areas are crucial to ensuring sustainable development, equity and inclusive growth in the post-2015 development agenda. This prioritization of *learning for all* children and youth would require continuing the current MDG efforts to get all girls and boys, especially the most marginalized, into school, but also make sure that children stay in school and learn. Ensuring that the education goal within the post-2015 development agenda is focused on equitable learning outcomes will help bind together and bring a more coherent approach to the Education for All and MDG frameworks and address the most notable gaps and weaknesses between them.

I. Focus on equity: The focus on learning must be combined with one on equity, with particular attention to rising inequality within countries.¹⁹ The new development framework must focus on reducing the learning gap between the poorest and richest children, and girls and boys, through targets that promote equity. An explicit focus on equity requires the poorest 10% of children currently out of primary school to be both in school and learning well.²⁰ This will require targeted action, including targeted funding, and redoubled efforts by national and local governments, families and communities to reach the poorest children, girls, children with disabilities, children from minority ethnic communities, and children who happen to live in conflict- or emergency-affected countries.²¹

Education needs to be linked to wider questions about how to ensure inclusive growth, sustained prosperity and sustainable development. Achieving inclusive growth will require all young people entering the labor market to have the skills necessary to find productive employment and be active citizens. A new development framework should include a focus on the skills that young people need to make a successful transition to adult life. Equitable social development is also dependent on education to empower learners, especially girls who face larger obstacles to entering primary school, to maximize their capacities, resources and opportunities to fully participate in society.²²

II. Focus on learning: Being able to read and write are critical for enabling all girls and boys to access a broader education and deal effectively with life as citizens and as workers. Without learning these core skills children are more likely to drop out of school and fail to make progress. But these core skills, while necessary, are far from sufficient. A quality education that allows young people to prosper in modern economies and societies requires a broader, more holistic framework of learning. In addition to reading and numeracy, children need to learn relevant transferable skills such critical thinking, problem solving, civic values, mental health and well-being, as well as life skills. Twenty-first century skills such as communication and

technological literacy are necessary to prepare children for the workforce and to be active, productive members of their communities.²³

Education systems for the future must enable children and youth to learn how to learn in changing contexts and conditions, be innovative, and adapt to and assimilate to change. Education must be grounded in, and promote, non-discrimination, gender equality and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Access to quality, relevant education that empowers all to utilize environmental resources sustainably is essential to equitable social development and a necessary foundation for sustainable development.

III. Focus on the learning continuum: The education MDG focuses on universal primary enrollment; however, there is abundant evidence that education begins at birth and continues in post-primary opportunities, whether through secondary schooling or non-formal programs. Quality early childhood development opportunities – which include health, nutrition, and stimulation – contribute powerfully to reducing poverty by ensuring girls and boys are nurtured at a young age, are strongly correlated with on-time school enrollment and have a long-term impact on students' learning outcomes in primary school and beyond.²⁴ Similarly, post-primary education, including formal secondary schooling and non-formal programs such as technical and vocational education, can lead to many social and economic returns such as increased individual wages, improved health outcomes for youth and their families, and increased civil engagement. Not only do more girls and boys need to make the transition from primary to post-primary opportunities, but the skills and competencies they learn need to be relevant to the 21st century's knowledge-based economy.

Ensuring quality learning and equity from early childhood through to adolescence will require better targeting of poor and marginalized groups, such as girls, the disabled, homeless and ethnic minorities. There are myriad ways that policy-makers must address the factors that keep marginalized populations from enrolling in schools. For girls in particular this can include providing financial support, recruiting and training teachers in a gender-sensitive manner, ensuring that textbooks are gender-sensitive and that schools are safe environments.²⁵ Free basic education is defined as a basic human right, which requires systems of accountability that better monitor delivery of education services. Bringing in the voice of the learners, including the voices of youth, will be critical in monitoring progress and help ensure that learners are provided with skills to successfully transition to adult life and the work force.²⁶

Balance global and local metrics: Across all scenarios, there is a debate about balancing global and country level goals and metrics; it is clear that global goals must reflect national priorities and that more attention must be paid to neglected contexts such as conflict and post conflict contexts, as well as to those countries with the least promising education metrics.²⁷ However, one of the lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals is that clear internationally comparable measures have acted as a significant spur to global progress. Striking this balance between clear globally comparable goals and allowing for national or regional level discretion is one critical question, not just for education in the post-2015 framework, but for all policy areas. There are some organizations in the global south that have already developed their own methods for measuring learning outcomes, which could be built on in the next round of global goals.²⁸

The Learning Metrics Task Force – a global effort engaging over 800 people across 70 countries, the majority from the global south – recently met to discuss these challenges and identified a small number of measures for tracking learning at the global level. The task force emphasized the need to

operationalize these measures while simultaneously helping to build measurement capacity at the national level. The six areas for measurement that are important to enable children and youth to constructively participate in a globalized world are:²⁹

- 1) Access to and completion of learning opportunities through *enrollment and completion indicators*.
- 2) Early childhood experiences that result in readiness for primary school through a *school readiness indicator*.
- 3) The ability to read and understand a variety of texts through: (1) a set of “learning to read” indicators at the early primary level; and (2) a set of “reading to learn” indicators at the end of primary and lower secondary levels.
- 4) The ability to use numbers and apply this knowledge to real-life situations through *numeracy indicators at the primary and secondary level*.
- 5) An adaptable, flexible skill set to meet the demands of the 21st century through an *indicator still to be developed (e.g., collaborative problem solving)*.
- 6) Exposure to a breadth of learning opportunities across seven domains (physical well-being, social and emotional, culture and the arts, literacy and communication, learning approaches and cognition, numeracy and mathematics, science and technology) through an *indicator still to be developed*.

Information for these areas of measurement would be collected using internationally comparable assessments in some cases, such as reading comprehension and mathematics, and using alternative assessments for others. It is likely that in this process, new models, measures, and methods for measurement will emerge that enable countries to translate assessment and evidence into action. Data collected against these domains of measurement should describe average achievement levels in addition to progress over time and equity across groups (girls/boys, urban/rural and wealth levels, at a minimum).

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***We welcome additional organizational sign-ons; please contact Meredy Talbot-Zorn:
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¹ *The Global Compact on Learning: Policy Guide*, The Center for Universal Education, The Brookings Institution, 2011.

² UNESCO. *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*. UNESCO, 2012.

³ *Toward Universal Learning: What Every Child Should Learn*, Learning Metrics Task Force, The Brookings Institution, 2013.

⁴ *The Global Compact on Learning: Policy Guide*.

⁵ *Out-of-School Children*, UNESCO Institute for Statistics. <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/out-of-school-children.aspx>

⁶ UNESCO. *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*. UNESCO, 2012.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Global Compact on Learning: Policy Guide*.

¹⁰ *Thematic Think Piece: Education and Skills for inclusive and sustainable development beyond 2015*, UN System Task Team on post-2015/UNESCO, 2012.

See also: *Beyond 2015: Education for the Future*, UNESCO Bangkok, 2012.

¹¹ *Beyond 2015: Education for the Future*, UNESCO Bangkok, 2012.

¹² Rebecca Winthrop, Mari Soliván and Kate Anderson. *The Learning Metrics Task Force Proposes Six Domains of Measurement for Global Tracking Post-2015*, Brookings Blog, March 8, 2013.

¹³ *Global Compact on Learning: Policy Guide*.

¹⁴ Psacharopoulos, George, and Patrinos, Harry Anthony. "Returns to Investment in Education: A Further Update." *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 2881*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2002.

¹⁵ Allison Anderson and Morgan Strecker. "Sustainable Development: A Case for Education." *Environment Magazine*, December 2012.

¹⁶ *Discussion paper: synthesis of debates and key questions for consideration in discussing education goals*, draft for discussion and further development. Unpublished, UNCIEF, 2013.

¹⁷ *Beyond 2015: Education for the Future*.

¹⁸ Based on an analysis of post-2015 position papers and think pieces: *Ending Poverty in Our Generation*. Save the Children, 2012; *Thematic Think Piece: Education and skills for inclusive and sustainable development beyond 2015*, UN System Task Team on post-2015/UNESCO, 2012; *Beyond 2015: Education for the Future*, UNESCO Bangkok, 2012; *Each Child Learning, Every Student a Graduate: A Bold Vision for Lifelong Learning Beyond 2015*, Basic Education Coalition (BEC), 2012; *Total Reach, Total Learning: Education Beyond 2015*, the Global Campaign for Education-US (GCE-US), 2012; *Commonwealth Recommendations for the Post-2015 Development Framework for Education*, Commonwealth Ministerial Working Group on the Post-2015 Development Framework for Education, 2012; *Post-2015 Education MDGs*, Results for Development Institute and ODI, 2012; *Post-2015 Development Goals: Oxfam International Position*, Oxfam International, 2013; *MDGs 2.0: Development and Poverty Eradication*, Center for Global Development, 2012; *Post-2015 Development Agenda: Goals, Targets and Indicators*, The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) and the Korea Development Institute, 2012. While not position papers, the following policy papers and strategies were also reviewed: *Global Compact on Learning*, Center for Universal Education, Brookings Institution, 2011; *UN Education First Initiative: The UN Secretary General's Global Initiative on Education*, United Nations, 2012; *Learning for All*, The Global Partnership for Education Strategic Plan, 2012.

¹⁹ *Thematic Think Piece: Education and Skills for inclusive and sustainable development beyond 2015*, UN System Task Team on post-2015/UNESCO, 2012.

²⁰ *Ending Poverty in Our Generation*. Save the Children, 2012.

²¹ Ibid. See also: *Global Compact on Learning: Policy Guide*.

²² *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2012*, UNESCO, 2012.

²³ *Beyond 2015: Education for the Future*. UNESCO Bangkok, 2012.

²⁴ *Global Compact on Learning: Policy Guide*.

²⁵ *Education For All Global Monitoring Report – Gender Review*, UNESCO, 2012.

²⁶ *Thematic Think Piece: Education and Skills for inclusive and sustainable development beyond 2015*, UN System Task Team on post-2015/UNESCO, 2012.

²⁷ *Discussion paper: synthesis of debates and key questions for consideration in discussing education goals*, draft for discussion and further development. Unpublished, UNCIEF, 2013. For instance, there could be a global goal of improved learning with countries defining this in ways suited to their own circumstances. Burnett and Felsman (2012) refer to this approach as 'common but differentiated', which has currently been practiced by UNICEF advising on the development of standardized targets for groups of countries. An example of this approach is the Global Minimum Entitlements introduced by Overseas Development Institute. Through this approach in education minimum standard involves literacy and a standard of knowledge and skills.

²⁸ The recent citizen led models of assessing children's basic skills like ASER in India and Pakistan and UWEZO in East Africa are examples of "south-south" models of measurement with wide-scale citizen participation. Covering close to a million children each year, these household-based learning assessments are carried out in over half a dozen countries and provide an alternative to top-down, school based measurements traditionally carried out in developed countries.

²⁹ Rebecca Winthrop, Mari Soliván and Kate Anderson. *The Learning Metrics Task Force Proposes Six Domains of Measurement for Global Tracking Post-2015*, Brookings Blog, March 8, 2013.