SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

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Introduction

This Policy Brief provides an overview of SDG 4, specifically the goal, targets and indicators, through a reflective review of the history, achievements and on-going debates and challenges related to the global education movement. The history of SDG 4 highlights the achievements, specifically with regards to the adoption of a single education goal, a more holistic recognition of education as lifelong learning, and the clear commitment to a rights-based approach to education. However, on-going debates and challenges remain. Specifically, the continuing emphasis on schooling and the education of children instead of lifelong learning; a narrow focus of measuring educational achievement in terms of learning outcomes; an emphasis on the value of education only if it leads to jobs; the continuing challenge of finding significant resources, which has paved the way for the entry of the private sector in the delivery of education; and the rising threat to participation of civil society organisations (CSOs) who have actively been engaged in the delivery and advocacy of education as a right. The aim is to motivate educators, practitioners, academics, policy-makers and advocates to develop appropriate educational initiatives and relevant policy responses, with a view to fulfilling the aims of SDG4 by 2030.

A History of Education and Sustainable Development as Global Goals

Education isn't new as a global goal. The link between education and sustainable development, however, is relatively new, and helps to explain the continuing tensions that can be observed in with current education goal, SDG 4. For a long time, UNESCO, the UN agency tasked with contributing to the advancement of thinking and practice in education has linked education with sustainable development. Two key UNESCO documents that continue to be revisited are the Faure Report (1972) and the Delors Report (1996). The Faure Report made popular the concept of 'Learning to be', which acknowledged the value of individual achievement, specifically the importance of increasing levels of literacy and numeracy in the world. It ushered in a series of global initiatives focusing on literacy across all ages, with an emphasis in the literacy gap in the developing world, primarily in South and Central Asia, Africa and Latin America. The 1996 Delors Report built on 'Learning to be', and made popular the four pillars, by adding 'Learning to Do, Learning to Know and Learning to Live together', thus expanding the challenge for learning beyond individual achievement, and expanding the scope of education beyond literacy to embrace the development of relevant knowledge, skills and also values linked to peace and harmony. Both Reports continue to provide strong foundations, not just in terms of the content of education, but its very purpose within a dynamically changing world.

These two global reports have contributed to the rise of key global education movements, in particular, the Education for All (EFA) movement which began formally in the 1990s, via the Jomtien Declaration (1990), which in turn was strengthened through the Dakar Framework for Action (2000). The 1990s also ushered in a series of UN global conferences that further established the need for education to be more explicitly linked to sustainable development. This link is explicit in Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, specifically within Chapter 36 of Agenda 21, adopted at the end of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. The Declaration recognised a wider range of educational interventions, not limited to the formal education system, and the need for public awareness to achieve sustainable development. This link was again further strengthened in 2002 at the end of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, with the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. The Plan recommended that the United Nations General Assembly consider adopting a decade of education for sustainable development. UNESCO was tasked by the UN General Assembly by virtue of Resolution 57/254 (2002), to take the lead in the promotion and advancement of the concept and practice of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), through the launch of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) from 2005 – 2014.

Despite attempts to better link these global education initiatives, specifically EFA and ESD and having clearly identified how they overlap, they remained separate (Wade and Parker, 2008). ESD was and continues to be seen as primarily a thematic concern, with a greater focus on the environment, while EFA was focused on the global education agenda, specifically on literacy and quality education. Less prevalent has been the focus on ESD providing a key dimension of what needs to be included in quality education. This series of fractured and siloed global education initiatives unfortunately continued with the adoption by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of only two goals from EFA, specifically Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Gender Equality as MDG 2 and 3, respectively. While the MDG Report (2015) identified that these two education-related MDG goals had demonstrated some progress by the end of 2015, the overall aim of EFA was unfortunately not achieved (UNESCO EFA 2000-2015 Summary Report 2015: p. 9). The lessons learned, specifically in terms of selective adoption of specific elements of global education goals, rather than keeping the integrity of the holistic education goal, was at the forefront of the minds of education advocates in its campaign to ensure that this fracturing of the education agenda won't be repeated in the formulation of the Post-2015 Global Development Agenda.

Achieving One Education Goal
This lesson—to ensure the integrity of the global education goal—was indeed fought for and won. In 2015, a single education goal we secured in SDG 4. The Goal embraces the different dimensions of previous goals within seven specific targets. Furthermore, the key principles of access, quality and equity have been maintained, the language of a rights-based approach to education strengthened and the recognition of the value of lifelong learning explicitly enshrined. This was made possible by the sustained vigilance and advocacy of education stakeholders during the post-2015 global consultation processes, that fortunately aligned with the post-EFA processes and culminated in the World Education Forum (WEF) in Incheon, South Korea in 2015. At the end of WEF, the Incheon Declaration (2015) was adopted that clearly called for the single and holistic education goal. The Incheon Declaration was further developed into the Education 2030 Framework for Action, that details out the targets, indicators and mechanisms for action required to support the achievement of SDG 4.

Lifelong Learning
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 was 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 (UIL, n.d). Furthermore, not only have the education targets identified 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.

A Rights-Based Approach
A further cause for celebration is the explicit acknowledgement of education as a right, as enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights. This was a contentious approach throughout the EFA period, with CSOs 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 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 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 those who are committed to the achievement of the full global education goal continue to monitor and advocate for.

Narrow Measurement
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. The SDGs 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: p. 2). Significant effort and resources went into this phase of the planning, to the point that some stakeholders have observed that there was very little new resources left to implement the desired change. Furthermore, 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 standards, 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. (2017:2-3), 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."

Therefore, there is a strong argument for the need to be open to a set of 'emergent' indicators that are supportive of the learning goals of the SDGs, and focus on working more collaboratively across disciplinary silos, an emphasis on what has been called 'soft skills', rather than the testing of learning outcomes. Arguments have also been made against the narrow indicator of successful education being measured based on securing a job. These narrow measurements of educational success can be overcome not just through the development of new indicators, but from a policy perspective, through cross-sectoral engagement – where education planning is linked to work and employment sector planning, which then links to more integrated national development policy priorities.

Conceptual Tensions
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, however, 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 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 and the Delors Reports. Furthermore, education advocates have advanced the argument for the need to ensure that it is not about just securing any job, but a job is clean, decent and meaningful. As such, education policy needs to work closely with those who conduct labour and employment planning to ensure that there is an alignment of these policy frameworks.

Having worked most of my life as an environmental educator in local community settings in the Asia-Pacific, I often recognise how climate change has helped 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. 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—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 remains a key hurdle. 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. However, there are some promising attempts that can be identified to address this reality, such as the establishment by the Australian Government of an inter-departmental group of senior officials which is responsible for coordinating efforts, domestically and internationally for Australia to implement the 2030 Agenda. This group is co-chaired by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT VNR 2019).

Local and Global Tensions

Tensions are not only linked to the different dimensions of the economic, social, environmental, cultural and political. Given that the SDGs are meant to be universal goals, there are also emerging tensions with regards to local and global commitments arising 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) highlighted the need for a more equitable allocation of resources within the Australian education system.

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 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 (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 (37). From a policy perspective, acknowledging these tensions between local and more global spending for education, will no doubt continue to be debated, as this is also replicated in other aid and development sectors, such as ODA for security, trade, governance, emergencies, etc.

Resources and the Private Sector

The lack of resources, specifically from governments, which from a rights-based approach are the primary duty bearers 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, some governments and CSOs, argue there is 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 (ASPBAE 2017). From a policy perspective, the argument is 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.

Civil Society
Civil society has continued to be active in the education space, most often recognised for its contribution to complementing the education gaps in the country. Some have questioned how different this is from the private sector filling in the gap. Many have argued that as a temporary mechanism, civil society is an important support. But in the end, the focus of CSOs should be on ensuring that governments are delivering on commitments to education as a right. It is this role that has often put CSOs at loggerheads with governments in a number of countries, where they 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 being arrested (see Radio Free Asia 2015). In some cases, the challenge to achieve gender parity, specifically education for girls, has also been met with violence (such as in Malala Yusoufzai's case). From a policy perspective, the issue of advocating for education rights and the right for citizens to express their views has become a political issue, in particular when young people—who are the main targets of education—have advocated for free education or even just access to quality education.

Moving Forward
The history, achievements and debates surrounding SDG4 provide some background to how we as educators, practitioners, academics, policy-makers and advocates, can respond to these challenges to effectively contribute to the achievement of SDG 4. This Brief also hopes to emphasise is how we need to become better in recognising the contribution of education in the transformation, not only to a new way of teaching and learning, but to the process that Freire (1970) has described as "conscientization"—the development of a consciousness of the problems we face, the critical understanding of the causes of these problems, and more importantly, the creative and collaborative confidence to formulate, adopt and implement policy solutions to respond to these problems, not only for 2030, but for future generations.

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