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This paper carefully examines the proposed post 2015 education targets and was prepared as a contribution to the technical review of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is based on a section of the forthcoming 2015 EFA Global Monitoring Report, to be launched on 9 April 2015.

Where do the proposed education targets fall short?

Introduction

The proposed SDG framework's expanded global agenda for education is designed to be ambitious and transformative. Yet at this historic juncture, what would it mean for countries and the international community to adopt a set of targets for education that are unrealistic, overambitious or too costly? Also of concern is how to improve the clarity of education targets so coherent indicators can be identified to monitor progress at the local, national, regional and global levels and to help countries devise effective implementation strategies and decide how to allocate resources.

The United Nations Secretary-General's Synthesis Report on the post-2015 sustainable development agenda argued that 'measurable targets and technically rigorous indicators' are needed and called for each target to be 'framed in language that is specific, measurable [and] achievable'. It was subsequently suggested, following intergovernmental negotiations on the post-2015 agenda, that 'technical proofing' of the targets be conducted, which would involve contributions by technical experts in addition to those of the UN System. This section briefly summarizes the GMR's main criticisms of the proposed education targets and then presents a more detailed discussion of their shortcomings, as a contribution to the debate.

Targets need to be specific and clear

Several of the proposed SDG education targets lack specificity and clarity in the concepts employed and outcomes expected. Specificity also relates to prioritization. Where there are many objectives within a target but none taking precedence, the ability to prioritize and allocate resources, required to achieve any goal, is eroded. Making targets more specific simplifies the selection of indicators and matching of objectives with actions. Superfluous language and multiple objectives undermine the attainment of targets. For example, EFA goal 3, which hoped to ensure 'equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes', arguably had little traction because it did not clearly define the particular skills or forms of education involved.

Some targets are not measurable

If targets cannot be adequately measured now or in the foreseeable future, accountability is threatened. Indeed, the use of the term 'targets' implies that the SDG agenda emphasizes quantitative measurement. However, some targets refer to outcomes for which data are currently unavailable, or which at least are not conventionally viewed as quantifiable.

Targets relating to attitudes and values necessary to peaceful and sustainable societies can be measured using various surveys,



including household surveys, with sufficient resources and clear definitions. Other targets present considerable challenges. The upgrading of education facilities to be 'effective learning environments', while laudable, would be a major challenge for measurement. The challenge to build 'inclusive' schools sidesteps the reality of contrasting notions of inclusivity. A global measurement of skills needed for 'decent jobs' is similarly difficult because of different types of skills, which vary by country, as does what is considered 'decent'. The idea of 'technical and vocational skills' raises several measurement issues. These are often specific to occupations. Definitions of required skills might change with employer demand or technological innovation. It would be a logistical nightmare to try to measure whether carpenters, mechanics or computer technicians, for example, have adequate technical skills apart from the vocational qualifications achieved.

The importance of realistic and relevant targets

Targets that have little chance of being met in a 15 year time-frame are unlikely to receive political commitment, support and cooperation from governments, donors, non-government organizations and local communities. The more ambitious the proposed target, the more unlikely it is to be met. For example, ensuring universal upper secondary education in the next 15 years is beyond the reach of most countries. At current rates of progress, even universal lower secondary completion is not projected to be reached in low and middle income countries until the latter half of the 21st century (see below).

Targets must also be relevant. A common criticism of the EFA goals, or at least of how they were quantified and monitored, was their lack of relevance to education challenges facing high income countries. The same cannot be said of the proposed SDG targets. Ensuring children and youth leave school with adequate learning outcomes, and providing youth and adults with the skills necessary for decent employment, are relevant to all countries, including high income ones. However, to be applicable to individual countries, targets should be formulated in a way that accounts for conditions facing youth from marginalized or vulnerable populations, and for the diversity of skills needed in differing economies.

Equity issues are not clearly articulated

The essence of the goal is the achievement of inclusive and equitable education of good quality. But the ambiguous language of some targets could lead to marginalized groups being left behind. The lack of reference to free and compulsory basic education – pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education – has worrying implications. The household cost of education is one of the most significant barriers to participation among children and youth from poor households. Some of the proposed targets promote forms or levels of education that especially benefit the most advantaged students, possibly leading to inequitable public spending. Moreover, while pre-primary education has been shown to have a strong positive impact on education and life outcomes for all children and especially those most disadvantaged (UNESCO, 2012), free and compulsory pre-primary education is not mentioned, while completion of upper secondary education is given high priority.

In some targets, the concept of equal access is either missing or inadequately defined. It could be interpreted as equal access by all children to good quality schools, regardless of parental income or family background: a commendable but highly ambitious objective. Or it could mean, more simply, equal access to any school. Regardless of definition, equal access does not necessarily lead to the more important aim of less inequality of outcomes. Disadvantaged groups could be left behind, while the most privileged can maintain or advance their relative position. Quantitative indicators for outcomes, particularly learning outcomes, for these groups are needed. It is also unclear whether the targets cover the most significant disadvantaged groups. Categories of vulnerability mentioned in the targets do not include poverty, even though the greatest inequality is between the richest and poorest households.

Critical issues need to be addressed in each education target

Drawing on these general points, there are specific issues on which each proposed education target falls short. The critical discussion below is offered as a starting point for a possible reformulation of targets if the intergovernmental negotiation offers such an opportunity.

- *Target 4.1. By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes*

The first target seeks to ensure that all children complete secondary education and acquire relevant learning outcomes. Its weaknesses are of particular concern. The main problem is that it does not separate secondary education into its lower and upper levels. The achievement of universal upper secondary by all countries by 2030 is unrealistic. Globally, the upper secondary gross enrolment ratio was 62% in 2012, but this figure conceals disparities among regions and countries: for example, the rate was 32% in sub-Saharan Africa. No country has ever gone from such levels to achieving universal upper secondary education within 15 years. If the target leads to prioritizing upper secondary education, which typically channels students into unequal tracks and programmes and is more costly per student, it would be to the detriment of the right to a full cycle of good quality basic education, including lower secondary education.

A still ambitious but more feasible target for a 15 year time frame is a basic education cycle: an international benchmark of at least 9 years of free, equitable and compulsory primary and lower secondary education. Analysis of documents in the UNESCO Right to Education Database indicates broad intention among countries to make lower secondary education free: 94 of 107 low and middle income countries have already legislated free lower secondary education, 66 through constitutional guarantees and 28 through other legal measures. Beyond legal guarantees the notion of 'free' requires clarity with respect to explicit (and implicit) fees charged to parents for educational services provided.

Target 4.1 does not say that primary and secondary education should be compulsory. Adding this notion to primary and lower secondary education would help ensure equitable access and completion, and would reflect the current situation. As of 2012, almost all countries had passed laws requiring school attendance at the primary level, and all but 25 had done so for lower secondary education.

- *Target 4.2. By 2030 ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education*

This target emphasizes universal access to good quality early childhood development (ECD) and pre-primary education programmes and assumes that such access can be equated with school readiness for all children. Given the high percentage of malnourished children worldwide and the estimate that 100 million children will still suffer from the effects of stunting in 2025, this assumption is problematic. Ensuring access to ECD would not necessarily address the complex dietary and health challenges faced by tens of millions of children.

The global gross enrolment ratio for early childhood education was 54% in 2012, but there is disparity among regions and countries: for example, the ratio was 20% in sub-Saharan Africa. One year of free and compulsory pre-primary education would help to close the gaps in participation, especially among children from poor households and marginalized communities. Country definitions of the purposes, duration and quality of ECD and pre-primary programmes vary significantly. So do policies governing the minimum qualifications of caretakers and teachers, the maximum number of children per qualified educator, and the extent to which caregivers possess expert knowledge about child development. The current target emphasizes access to 'quality' ECD or pre-primary programmes, even though there is less international consensus over what good quality programmes at this level actually entail and how they can be compared across countries.

- *Target 4.3. By 2030 ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university*

This target sets a highly unrealistic agenda. If universal upper secondary education by 2030 is beyond reach, access for all to tertiary education is even more so. The global participation rate in tertiary education was 32% in 2012; the rate in sub-Saharan Africa was only 8%. In the unlikely scenario universal secondary education were achieved by 2030, it would take several more years to achieve equal access for all in tertiary

education. Moreover, since many countries provide technical and vocational education at the secondary level or in both secondary and tertiary education, measuring and monitoring equal access to such programs would be difficult.

At the same time, the target could be more specific, more equitable and, ultimately, more ambitious. A target of this type that could be monitored would focus on opportunities available to all qualified learners who wish to pursue studies at the tertiary level (whether universities or technical and vocational programmes), with a focus on equity and non-discrimination.

The idea of 'affordable' tertiary education lacks clarity in both global and national terms. In many countries, much tertiary education is non-public, typically entailing higher costs to students or their families. How would the international community determine in real terms whether technical, vocational and tertiary education are more or less affordable?

The notion of adult learning and education is missing, but is fundamental to any lifelong learning framework, was included in the EFA framework, and should be included in this target. Without it, the proposed target is less ambitious and transformative than existing international agreements.

Unlike other education targets, this one focuses on access only and does not specify desired outcomes. One of its possible outcomes, skill acquisition, is spelled out in target 4.4. Combining the two would address this weakness and reduce the number of targets to be achieved.

- *Target 4.4. By 2030, increase by x% the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.*

This outcome-oriented target focuses on improving the acquisition of work-related skills among some percentage of youth and adults. It is difficult to gauge how ambitious and transformative this target is. The precise extent to which youth and adults currently possess relevant work skills is unknown. For example, the fact that unemployment rates are high in some countries does not necessarily reflect the skill levels of their workers. A more ambitious target would be to ensure that all

youth and adults possess a measurable set of defined skills.

In theory, the target could cover a wide range of skills, knowledge and competencies: foundation skills such as literacy and numeracy; transferable skills such as problem-solving, creative and critical thinking, effective communication of ideas, and 'grit' and determination; and more specific technical, practical or technological skills related to a particular job or occupation. 'Relevant' skills need to be more clearly defined. One possible focus could be on particular types of skills, such as digital or ICT, that are high in demand in the global economy.

In practice, literacy and numeracy are the only skills currently measured (and captured in target 4.6), mainly in high and middle income countries. Both are relevant to work and life; yet measurement strategies of each skill would likely vary depending on whether the focus was on employment or lifelong learning. It is particularly challenging to identify concrete indicators that capture relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship, and that can be compared across countries. The target's current formulation is vague about routes to skill acquisition, whether formal schooling, non-formal programmes or informal learning. Such information is important in developing, implementing and measuring policy at the country level. A more specific formulation would look at the proportion of learners who acquire skills in different education contexts.

- *Target 4.5. By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations*

This target is meant to underscore the paramount importance of equity in education. Is it better to have a stand-alone target such as this that focuses on equity and gender? Or would it be more effective to include explicit reference to equity and gender in each target? This issue is relevant for other SDGs, not only the education goal. Whatever decision is made, it is critical to apply disaggregated equity-oriented indicators across all targets so that equity issues are comprehensively acknowledged and consistently addressed. Moreover, equity considerations should go beyond ensuring the

most disadvantaged meet a minimum or loosely defined criteria of 'equal access', and should to some extent include equality of outcomes.

This target only refers to gender disparities and makes no reference to gender inequalities in education. Some argue that stipulating a separate gender equality goal (SDG 5), separate from the education one, would detract from the monitoring of gender inequalities in education. There seems little justification for the current selection of vulnerable groups in the target, which should be expanded. The notion of vulnerability could include, for example, children in conflict zones, children residing in poor households, those living in sparsely populated regions, street children, children in migrant families, those belonging to indigenous or nomadic groups, language minorities and so on.

- *Target 4.6. By 2030 ensure that all youth and at least x% of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy*

The basic right of all adults to literacy and numeracy is implicit in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which refers to the 'fundamental' stage of education. Given the ambition of the SDG agenda, and the difficulty in setting global benchmarks, this target should aim for all adults to achieve literacy and numeracy by 2030 to be in line with these earlier commitments.

Equally important is the acknowledgement of literacy as a multidimensional skill, not a dichotomy, one that exists on a continuum. Thus, the target should be enhanced by explicitly basing it on a notion of functional literacy and numeracy in terms of a minimum proficiency level needed for active participation in the community. This would ensure that the target deals with basic skills and competences that transform lives.

- *Target 4.7. By 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development*

This target can be evaluated in at least two ways. On the one hand, its explicit link to sustainable development is strong, capturing the transformative aspirations of the broad post-2015 development agenda. Many, if not all, of the notions listed as promoting sustainable development are deeply embedded in principles established in existing international frameworks and conventions. The target is outcome oriented and universally applicable. More than other targets, it touches on the social, humanistic and moral purposes of education. Indeed, if adopted, this target will be one of the few international objectives to acknowledge the role of culture and the cultural dimensions of education.

On the other hand, the current formulation reflects the interests of many organizations and institutions. Concepts need to be clarified, as several of them overlap. Clarity is also necessary to construct a limited set of valid and measurable indicators. Considerable work would be needed to develop qualitative indicators sensitive to diverse country contexts. The target would also need to specify the education levels and/or age groups to which its concepts apply.

- *Means of implementation 4.a. Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all*

This is an important target that addresses the lack of adequate physical infrastructure in many education systems, as well as the need for safe and inclusive environments that nurture learning for all children, regardless of background and disability status. It is universally applicable and highlights dimensions of education apart from learning outcomes. Conceptions of safe and inclusive learning environments can be found, for example, in the INEE Minimum Standards and UNICEF's Child-Friendly School Checklist. However, while certain aspects of the target are specific, relevant and measurable, it is much less clear how schools would become 'effective' learning environments and the extent to which this involves reforms to curricula, instructional materials, pedagogy and school governance.

- *Means of implementation 4.b. By 2020 expand by x% globally the number of scholarships for developing countries in particular LDCs, SIDS and African countries to enrol in higher education, including vocational training, ICT, technical, engineering and scientific programmes in developed countries and other developing countries*

It is questionable whether such a target, aimed at a specific group of countries, should be included in a universal development agenda. While it aims to reduce inequity among countries, it could exacerbate inequity within them by primarily benefiting those from the most privileged and politically connected backgrounds. There is little evidence that scholarships build knowledge and teaching capacity within beneficiary countries; often they are used as a means to see aid allocations return to the donor country.

The target assumes that student mobility is among the best means to increase the formation of expert human capital in resource-constrained education systems. However, while data on cross-national higher education scholarships are available, there is a lack of information on the benefits, such as outcomes of scholarships and whether students return to their home countries. Data are also lacking on the national origins of students in technical or engineering programmes.

With its focus on traditional scholarships, the target may already be out of date, given

the transformation under way in access to specialized bodies of knowledge through expansion of e-learning, distance and online courses (such as massive open online courses, or MOOCs) and cross-border forms of higher education.

Finally, it is remarkable that there is no overall finance target, or at least a financing equity target that would track how domestic and external financing is used to serve the disadvantaged in all countries.

- *Means of implementation 4.c. By 2030 increase by x% the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially LDCs and SIDS*

Progress towards the post-2015 education SDG will be stymied if the quality and effectiveness of teaching are not front and centre in the main list of targets. Teaching may be considered a 'means of implementation', but comparing teachers to improved infrastructure and increased scholarships ignores, and weakens, the critical role teachers play in the learning and maturation processes of children and youth. The current formulation of the target narrowly focuses on challenges facing low and middle income countries, where the quantitative gap in the supply is well documented (UNESCO, 2014). But the need for a sufficient supply of qualified and trained teachers and ways to ensure effective teaching are paramount in all countries.

A more ambitious target should focus on the instructional needs of all learners. To be more transformational, the target should underscore the need to ensure quality teaching for all by describing teachers who are professionally trained, motivated (through adequate remuneration, working conditions and recognition), well-supported (through in-service training) and deployed where required.

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