Review of SDG implementation and interrelations among goals

Discussion on SDG 4 – Quality education

Tuesday, 9 July 2019, 3:00 PM–6:00 PM, Conference Room 4

Background Note

Summary

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is universal, holistic and indivisible, with a special imperative to leave no one behind. The achievement of SDG 4 – ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all – plays a central role in building sustainable, inclusive and resilient societies. While education in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is most explicitly formulated as a stand-alone goal (SDG4), it also has reciprocal linkages across the 2030 Agenda. There are a number of education-related targets and indicators in other SDGs, including health and well-being (Target 3.7), gender equality (Target 5.6), decent work (Target 8.6), responsible consumption and growth (Target 12.8), and climate change mitigation (Target 13.3).

Progress has been made towards achieving SDG4, and there are new knowledge horizons and opportunities for strengthened solidarity and partnerships around the provision of quality education and lifelong learning for all. Yet the context is also changing with new technologies and skill demands, as well as economic shocks and environmental degradation. Many barriers to education access and educational outcomes remain in place and challenges to the monitoring of progress remain. Since education is not only an integral part of, but also a key enabler for sustainable development, it needs to be included in national development plans and strategies for achieving all the SDGs.

- What are some practical ways to improve access to quality education and life-long learning and deliver genuine impact both on people and sustainable development? Which ones can be scaled up or replicated for success?

- Which groups are the easiest/most difficult to reach and what can be done to ensure that no one is left behind in access to quality education and learning or teacher training?

- What actions can countries take to monitor the quality of education and ensure better learning outcomes?

- Which are the most critical interlinkages between SDG 4 and other goals and targets across the 2030 Agenda? How can co-benefits be promoted and trade-offs reduced?

- How do learning systems need to change to match a rapidly changing world with technological shifts, global integration and climate pressures?

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is universal, holistic and indivisible, with a special imperative to leave no one behind. Education and the achievement of SDG 4 – ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all – plays a central role in building sustainable, inclusive and resilient societies. Much progress was made under the Millennium Development Goals toward universal primary school enrollment; SDG 4 now aims to raise the bar and make education a catalyst for broader change toward sustainable development.

Education is a basic right and elementary to human dignity. SDG 4 also has reciprocal linkages across the 2030 Agenda. Access to quality education is an avenue for social mobility and reducing inequalities. Education is essential for building the knowledge base we need to tackle critical challenges like climate change. Education will help youth prepare for employment in the high-skill jobs of the fourth industrial revolution. And education is a foundation for peaceful societies and effective institutions.

Education is essential for sustainable development, but investments in education that are not accompanied by concurrent progress in other aspects of human wellbeing will fall short of enabling all people to realize their full potential in life. Good child health and

nutrition are essential for securing learning outcomes – not only in terms of increased class attendance, but also for improving educational achievements. Similarly, ending poverty, thereby reducing pressures to put children to work, may be essential to universal school enrolment. Such considerations may be especially relevant for vulnerable groups that tend to suffer from multiple deprivations and are therefore critical to realizing the overall objective of 'leaving no one behind'.

While education in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is most explicitly formulated as a stand-alone goal (SDG4), there are also a number of education-related targets and/or indicators in other sustainable development goals. These include health and well-being (Target 3.7), gender equality (Target 5.6), decent work (Target 8.6), responsible consumption and growth (Target 12.8), and climate change mitigation (Target 13.3).

Status and trends[1]

Progress has been made to close the gaps in completion of primary and lower secondary school. Data from 2013-2017 indicate that globally primary school completion is 85 per cent for primary school and 73 per cent for lower secondary school.[2]

Despite considerable progress on education access and participation over the past years, 262 million children and youth of age 6 to 17 were still out of school in 2017 and more than half of children and adolescents are not meeting minimum proficiency standards in reading and mathematics.

In 2017, two out of every three children globally participated in organized learning one year before the official primary entry age. Such learning is linked to fostering children's readiness for school and their future learning experience. The rate is less than 50 per cent

---

[1] Data on status and trends in this section is referenced from the Report of the Secretary-General on Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.
[2] UNESCO. 2018. *Global Education Monitoring Report 2019*. Paris.

in sub-Saharan Africa and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) which could have implications for global inequality.

In 2015, an estimated 617 million—more than 50 per cent—of children and adolescents of primary and lower secondary school age worldwide were not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics. Of these, about two-thirds are attending school but are not learning in the classroom or drop out of school.

In 72 countries with recent data, around 7 in 10 children aged 3 and 4 were developmentally on track in at least three of the following domains: literacy-numeracy, physical development, social emotional development and learning.

Globally, there has been little progress in the percentage of primary school teachers who are trained– stagnating at about 85 per cent since 2015. The proportion is lowest in sub-Saharan Africa (64 per cent).

Rapid technological changes present opportunities and challenges, but the learning environment, capacity of teachers and the quality of education have not kept pace. Refocused efforts are needed to improve learning outcomes for the entire lifecycle, especially for women, girls, and marginalized people in vulnerable settings.

About 750 million adults —two-thirds of whom are women—remained illiterate in 2016. Half of the global illiterate population lives in Southern Asia, and a quarter live in sub-Saharan Africa.

Many developing countries still lack basic infrastructure and facilities to provide effective learning environments. Sub-Saharan Africa faces the biggest challenges—at the primary and lower secondary levels, less than half of schools have access to electricity, the Internet, computers, and basic drinking water.

Official Development Assistance (ODA) for scholarships amounted to $1.3 billion in 2017. Australia, France, Japan, the United Kingdom and EU Institutions accounted for nearly two-thirds of this total.

Rural and urban differentials are also evident -- about 85 percent of countries (with data) reported higher out of-school rates for primary and secondary school in rural areas compared to urban areas.

Resource constraints pose challenges for meeting SDG 4 as only one third of all countries spend between 15 per cent and 20 per cent of total government expenditure on education as recommended in the Education 2030 Framework for Action.

Successes and challenges

It is a decisive moment to take stock of how to accelerate progress towards SDG 4, and to affirm the significance of education to the rest of the 2030 Agenda. Progress has been made and there are new knowledge horizons and opportunities for strengthened solidarity and partnerships around the provision of quality education and lifelong learning for all. But the context is also changing with new technologies and skill demands, as well as economic shocks and environmental degradation and many barriers to education access and educational outcomes remain in place.

Stakeholders highlight the importance of implementing a gendered approach to education for accelerating progress towards SDG 4 through, among other approaches, financial and logistical support for women and girls, employment of female teachers, the inclusion of reproductive and sexual rights education in curricula, and increased encouragement of girls and women to study sciences, engineering, and technology. There are also efforts to ensure that all girls and women can equitably attend schools and learning facilities by ensuring that safe, gender separated, and accessible sanitation facilities (e.g. school toilets) are usable, including measures for safe and dignified menstrual hygiene management. Education also has a responsibility to ensure that new technologies do not exacerbate divides, including gender divides, by including digital skills in the curriculum early on.

Education provides the means to transmit knowledge, values and skills across generation, enabling societies to set the foundation for thriving in the future. Despite a number of actions undertaken at all levels, public awareness of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs

appear to remain still relatively modest, especially at the grassroots and community level. Awareness and communications strategies sometimes suffer from the lack of sustainable and sufficient institutional and financial resources. There is a need to step up awareness-raising activities in the next phase of implementation. Fostering sustainable and long-term behavior change with the younger generations including through integrating SDGs into education curricula, is important.

Especially in a rapidly changing world with technological shifts, global integration and climate pressures; educational needs are being called into question in terms of how learning systems match with constantly changing demands. The ways in which learning prepares individuals for decent work (Target 4.4), as well as for life or 'global citizenship' in a plural, interdependent, and interconnected world (Target 4.7) is increasingly important. Decisive action is needed as today's skills will not match the jobs of tomorrow and newly acquired skills may quickly become obsolete. Efforts are being taken to revolutionize educational and learning systems to respond to the technology revolution.

Efforts to improve access to schooling and the quality of education are in order. Progress toward universal completion of primary and secondary school was significant after 2000, but in recent years progress has stalled. The proportion of out of school children has been flat since 2008 with 9 per cent missing primary school, 16 percent missing lower secondary school, and 36 per cent missing upper secondary school – whether because of delayed entry, dropping out or missing school all together.[3] The slowing down of progress could reflect difficulties reaching those populations that are being left behind. It could also be related to other deprivations that must be addressed to enable children to attend school like poverty and poor nutrition.

Being at school is not enough if children are not learning. The quality of education remains a significant challenge with too many children not reaching minimum levels of proficiency in reading and mathematics, let alone gaining the knowledge to participate in a more interconnected world and to act on the issues highlighted in Target 4.7 including

---

[3] UNESCO. 2018. *Global Education Monitoring Report 2019*. Paris.

sustainable development, human rights and gender equality. The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests 15-year-old students from around the world in reading, math and science. There are vast variations in the learning that is achieved across countries including across OECD countries where 20 per cent of students do not attain baseline levels of proficiency in reading. The most successful countries based on test scores have high and universal expectations of students; a strong focus on good teaching; resources targeted at struggling students and schools; and commitments to long-term and coherent strategies for education.[4] Teacher training and ensuring that teachers have access to teaching resources is also of critical importance in improving the quality of -learning.

Higher education is a focus of Target 4.3; and plays an important role in advancing the quality of learning and supporting life-long learning goals. It is also an important part of other goals from reducing poverty, supporting economic growth and increasing access to decent work; to advancing knowledge and innovation around health care, climate change and peaceful institutions. Financial requirements for higher education can be prohibitive and can limit access with implications for inequality. Tertiary education is least affordable in Sub-Saharan Africa where it exceeds 60 per cent of average national income in most countries.[5]

Equitable access to education and lifelong learning means that no groups or individuals should be without access. The commitment to inclusive education extends to migrants, displaced persons and refugees. In an era of intensified globalization, migration and displacement are emerging as essential development policy issues with implications for SDG 4. Yet, there is insufficient attention to how migration, forced displacement and education interact to influence social and economic mobility. It is therefore crucial to better understand the influence of education on migration and forced displacement, as well as the complex challenges and unique opportunities that movements of people present for education systems and skills acquisition, decent work and the chance for a

---

[4] PISA, OECD. 2015. *PISA: Results in Focus*. Paris.
[5] UNESCO. 2018. *Global Education Monitoring Report 2019*. Paris.

dignified life. The process for recognition of professional qualifications of refugees and forcibly displaced persons needs to be efficient and flexible. The UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, in the course of negotiation, is one such mechanism to ensuring integration.

More comprehensive and reliable data is also needed to inform policies and monitor improvements in educational systems to deliver inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong opportunities for all. There have been wide-ranging advancements in the development and measurement of SDG 4 and its 10 targets covering 11 global and 32 thematic indicators. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics continues to lead the development of clearly defined, valid, and internationally comparable data with broad geographical coverage.

Yet, challenges to the monitoring of SDG 4 progress remain. Among others, these include incomplete methodological development; limited data availability in many countries and regions and on various sources of information including on the nature of interlinkages between education and other goals; and insufficient funding both for countries to implement the SDG4 indicator framework, as well as for global international agencies and regional organizations to develop indicators. Efforts to improve monitoring of and reporting on inequalities in education are being made through the WIDE (World Inequality Database on Education) platform.

Recommendations for action: Mechanisms and partnerships to accelerate progress[6]

All SDGs are interdependent and can only be achieved if implemented together. Since education is not only an integral part of, but also a key enabler for sustainable development, it needs to be included in national development plans and strategies to

---

[6] Recommendations for action draw from the outcome of the Global Education Meeting 2018 – Brussels Declaration – held 3-5 December 2018 in Brussels, Belgium.

achieving all SDGs. Broad consultation indicates the following actions that are necessary in different contexts to achieve SDG 4 targets.

a) Inclusion and equity in and through education and training are vital to ensuring a transformative education agenda, and **the right to safe, quality education and learning throughout life, based on the principles of non-discrimination, gender equality and equal opportunity for all must be ensured.** For this, strategic context specific and culturally sensitive legislation and policies are in order to make education and training systems more equitable and inclusive "leaving no-one behind". This requires that all children and youth have access to quality early childhood development, care and education. It also requires enhanced access to post-secondary education, including technical and vocational education, further and tertiary education, including university, accessible to all. Particular attention should be given to those in vulnerable situations, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, those in remote rural areas, ethnic minorities, the poor, women and girls, migrants, refugees, and displaced persons, whether as a result of conflict or natural disasters.

b) Teaching is a profession and teachers, school leaders, educators and trainers all play a vital role in the collective responsibility to prepare future generations. Accordingly, **greater support and resources are needed for relevant initial and continuous professional development, efficient and effective policies, appropriate recruitment and deployment processes, decent working conditions, and opportunities for sharing promising practices, professional autonomy and career pathways for teachers**. Measures are also needed to prevent teacher attrition to ensure a motivated, supported, highly skilled, qualified, adequately resourced and empowered teaching force. Teachers and their organizations and institutions should be involved in the development, monitoring and evaluation of education policy.

c) Highlighting that literacy, including functional literacy, is still a major challenge, **greater efforts are needed to eradicate illiteracy through formal and non-formal education and training** and ensure equitable access to digital literacy, as well as media and information literacy as a continuum of proficiency levels within a lifelong learning perspective.

d) Education affects the aspirations, beliefs and attitudes of migrants, refugees and displaced persons and their sense of belonging in host communities. Investing in the inclusion of migrants and displaced persons in education systems also helps host communities to understand and fight stereotypes and discrimination and promote cohesive societies. Recognition of higher education qualifications of refugees and migrants through the UNESCO Regional Conventions, and other mechanisms such as the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, are important instruments to meet the aspirations of individuals and are beneficial to both host countries, as well as countries of origin. **There is a need to include migrants, displaced persons, returnees, asylum seekers, refugees and stateless persons in education and training systems and to facilitate recognition of their qualifications, skills and competencies, taking account of national context, national legislation and international agreements.**

e) Social, political, environmental and economic changes, as well as accelerated technological innovations, have profound implications for education and training systems. Accordingly, **commitments are needed to support lifelong learning opportunities for all to ensure necessary competencies for personal development, decent work and sustainable development, with attention to climate change, adaptation and mitigation.** Additionally, education institutions must provide children, youth and adult learners with the competences to be active citizens in democratic and sustainable societies. This includes efforts to promote education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, democracy and human rights, gender equality, age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education, physical education and sports, education in native language, peace and non-violence, global citizenship and active participation, appreciation for cultural diversity, multilingualism, intercultural dialogue, solidarity and more peaceful, tolerant and inclusive societies. This requires attention to pedagogy, curricula, teaching and learning materials, assessments, initial teacher training and continuous professional development, inter alia.

f) **Higher education and technical and vocational education and training based on collaboration with all relevant stakeholders is important for the future** including regional and national mechanisms for the recognition of higher education and vocational

qualifications. Skills acquired through non-formal and informal education and learning also require support.

g) **Adherence to the international benchmarks of allocating at least 4-6 per cent of Gross Domestic Product and/or at least 15-20 per cent of total public expenditure to education is necessary to meet SDG 4 targets**. There is a need for more efficient and equitable resource allocation and improved accountability in expenditure including through legislation. Accordingly, strengthened domestic resource mobilization is in order, including through tax reform, anti-corruption measures and tracking of illicit financial flows, as agreed in the Addis Ababa Conference on Financing for Development. In addition, SDG 4 will require increased volume and predictability of international aid towards meeting the benchmark of 0.7 per cent of GNP, with active participation of governments, the private sector, philanthropic organizations and foundations to strengthen public education, and with a larger share of aid to countries with the greatest needs. Funding should prioritize resources to improve the quality of education and social outcomes in an equitable and inclusive way according to needs and priorities of countries.

h) Children and young people have a right to learn free from violence. A safe learning environment, free of bullying and violence, including gender-based violence, is critical to improve educational and social outcomes. **Harassment and violence of all forms in education institutions must be addressed.**

i) Attacks on education and training have damaging impact – with the potential to increase student dropout and teacher attrition, lead to extended school and university closures, diminish the quality of education and cause physical and psychological harm. In this regard, **education and all its facilities and institutions should be protected from attacks and military use, and parties to armed conflict should be urged not to use schools and universities for military efforts**.

j) Acknowledging that the international community has embraced the new monitoring framework, which calls on diversifying education and training data sources and the current review of progress through agreed national, regional and global processes, **efforts are needed to strengthen monitoring of inclusion, equity and quality**. This includes

optimizing education governance systems and the use of existing indicators and ensuring more disaggregated data to better track inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, language, income, disability status, migratory status and geographical location. In recognizing the value and risks associated with Big Data, actions must emphasize the importance of protecting personal data of learners and teachers.
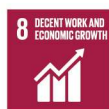
k) Progress toward SDG 4 calls for the **meaningful involvement of youth, students, teachers, school and post-secondary institution leaders, and their representative organizations, as well as communities, parents, civil society and academia at all stages**, from planning to monitoring progress in ensuring the right to quality education for all. In this regard, the capacities of public authorities and stakeholders need to be strengthened to monitor and evaluate equity and quality in education and training and to ensure more transparent reporting for public accountability.

l) **National and regional SDG4 coordination and implementation mechanisms need to be reinforced to strengthen international cooperation, solidarity and partnerships** by learning from each other's experiences and developing joint initiatives ensuring complementarity and synergy in our efforts to meet our shared goals and commitments.

m) **Education is a public good and public responsibility, a fundamental human right and an important basis for ensuring personal fulfilment and for the realization of other rights essential for peace and sustainable development.** Governments have the primary responsibility to deliver on the right to education and a central role as custodians of efficient equitable and effective management and financing of public education accessible to all.

Guiding questions

- What are some practical ways to improve access to quality education and life-long learning and deliver genuine impact both on people and sustainable development? Which ones can be scaled up or replicated for success?
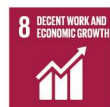
- Which groups are the easiest/most difficult to reach and what can be done to ensure that no one is left behind in access to quality education and learning or teacher training?

- What actions can countries take to monitor the quality of education and ensure better learning outcomes?

- Which are the most critical interlinkages between SDG 4 and other goals and targets across the 2030 Agenda? How can co-benefits be promoted and trade-offs reduced?

- How do learning systems need to change to match a rapidly changing world with technological shifts, global integration and climate pressures?

HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

#HLPF #SDGs #GlobalGoals sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2019

Annex 1: SDG 4 targets

SDG 4	Targets under SDG 4	
Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	4.1	By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes
	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
	4.3	By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university
	4.4	By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship
	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
	4.6	By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy
	4.7	By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the 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
	4.A	Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all
	4.B	By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries
	4.C	By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states