Leaving no-one behind: contribution to the HLPF July 2016 session

Education and Academia Stakeholder Group

Leaving no-one behind: what do we mean and what does it entail?

'Leaving no-one behind' is a principle at the heart of the Sustainable Development Agenda, as its goals and targets address all nations and peoples, emphasising inclusion, equality, equity, non-discrimination and respect for all human rights, regardless of gender, age, economic status, location, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, caste, sexual orientation, and residency status. It highlights how interconnected we all are and implies removing the political, economic, cultural and social barriers, as well as the power relations, that anchor a culture of violence, discrimination, repressive rule, commodification of life and peoples, disregard of human rights, and impunity and that prevent each one of us from actively participating in society and the fulfilment of our human rights, in an environment conducive to well-being and dignity.

As we start the implementation of the SDG Agenda, we must acknowledge that the Millennium Development Goals did not succeed in addressing inequalities; in fact, inequalities have grown worldwide. The guiding principle of leaving no-one behind is of particular relevance in a context of growing and multiple crises, including economic, environmental, health and conflict crises, all of which affect especially those that are already most marginalised. Leaving no-one behind must thus remain at the heart of the SDG Agenda as we move forward, ensuring structural change which leads to equality and inclusion is promoted.

SDG4 has a crucial role in promoting the achievement of the full spectrum of SDGs, considering social, economic and environmental development, as it promotes the enhancement of citizenship and the ability of all men and women, boys and girls, to achieve their full potential and actively participate in society. Education is a fundamental human right and an enabling right that promotes all other social, economic, cultural, political and civil rights. Furthermore, formal, non-formal and informal education and lifelong learning play a vital role in learning to do, learning to be, learning to live together and learning to transform self and societies towards the common good.

Leaving no-one behind is at the core of SDG4 through its emphasis on equitable and inclusive education, and entails that everyone must be able to access and complete a full cycle of quality and free education. This right of all students and learners to realise their full educational potential must start at birth and continue through all stages of life, including early childhood, primary education, lower and upper secondary education, higher education and beyond, in the context of lifelong learning. It implies that multiple forms of discrimination and violence should be overcome in and through education. It also implies that public education systems should be strengthened, with public resources financing public education, including those from ODA, and that privatisation trends, evidenced across the globe, which consolidate social segregation should be halted. In a context of growing crises and conflicts, the right to education must be especially ensured for those most affected: marginalised children, youth and adults.

Focusing on implementation: highlights and priorities

Ensuring no-one is left behind in years to come will require significant efforts at the global, regional and national levels. A crucial aspect will be the broad dissemination of the Agenda at all levels, raising awareness and ownership of the SDGs as a common horizon and platform for action. This will be the basis to harness the necessary political commitment from Member States and the international community in ensuring all targets are met, through a spirit of collaboration among governments and all other stakeholders, and through inter-sectoral approaches that foster dialogue and coordination, in tune with the recognition of the indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights that are reflected across the 17 SDGs.

Establishing global, regional and national monitoring and follow-up mechanisms of the SDGs, as well as ensuring the active participation of civil society at all levels, is critical, as will be detailed later. At regional level, the regional UN Commissions and other relevant actors, including civil society, will be important in flagging common social and educational issues that can be tackled through joint strategies. Fostering cooperation, exchange and learning among countries will help advance the principle of leaving no behind, based on horizontal relations where critical exchange of policy transfer can be upheld.

Furthermore, it will be important to bring national legislations and policies in line with the commitments made under the SDGs, whenever needed, including the putting in place of affirmative action to address structural, institutional and historical discriminations, disadvantages and exclusions. This will require the development of contextualised national and regional implementation strategies and plans, which should be carried out in a participatory manner, particularly involving those most marginalised and locally defined minorities. Given the breadth and depth of the SDGs, national implementation strategies could benefit from the identification of interim 'stepping stones' that serve as benchmarks of progress made between now and 2030.

Crucial to implementation of the SDGs at all levels, and to the core principle of leaving no-one behind, is the generation of information and knowledge that allows us to better understand all nuances of the challenges ahead, including causes and consequences. Development of robust disaggregated data will be necessary, as well as participatory research and collaboration with academia. Such production of data and research will allow for better definition of strategies that ensure inclusion of all groups and achievement of the various targets across all goals.

Regarding education, it will be important to retain coherence with the human rights paradigm, challenging those discourses of global education policy which reduce human beings to human capital and focus only on economic rates of return, and open the door to profit-making. Furthermore, it will be important to achieve relevant, inclusive and robust national and local education systems that mirror the societies in which they operate. To do so, education must respond to its community, rather than forcing its students and learners into a one-size-fits-all education model. In this sense, crucial to leaving no-one behind in education is acknowledging cultural diversity, moving away from homogenising patterns which deny diversities and identities

which lead to multiple forms of discrimination and exclusions within education systems and beyond.

Quality education, that is inclusive and equitable, promotes the overcoming of multiple forms of discrimination and of violence and entails global citizenship and care for others and for the environment, all of which is paramount to ensure no-one is left behind. At the heart of quality education, we must have qualified and motivated teachers and other education workers. Education workers must be recognised as agents critical to structural change which leads to equality and inclusion. It is thus a priority in the implementation of the SDGs to ensure teachers and other education workers are supported with decent salaries and working conditions, as well as continuous professional development, and representation in policy and decision-making. Mechanisms for social dialogue with teacher organisations must be established and/or strengthened.

Necessary resources must be made available for the accomplishment of the SDG agenda, including the full spectrum of SDG4 targets, to ensure quality and inclusive education for all - and especially for those hardest to reach, such as out-of-school children, youth and adult who cannot read or write, and all above-mentioned discriminated groups. Governments must allocate maximum available resources, and never less than 4-6% of GDP and 15-20% of public expenditure, as established in the Education 2030 Framework for Action, adopted in Paris by Member States in November 2015. Only by guaranteeing free education can governments deliver their promise to leave no-one behind.

Increases in domestic funding should be made available through progressive tax systems, prevention of tax evasion and by ending harmful tax incentives for big business. Governments must also ensure that funds for education are not lost to corruption and inefficiencies. Similarly, ODA and international cooperation must increase, and donor harmonisation must be ensured. Furthermore, programmes of debt cancellation and relief must be put forward and the Principles of Responsible Sovereign Lending and Borrowing established by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) should be put into practice.

Enhanced financial dedication to SDG4 will entail the necessary conditions for putting into practice the 12 years of free primary and secondary education, as determined in target 4.1. Tuition fees and other economic barriers related to access to education (such as transport, school materials and uniforms) have undermined economically disadvantaged groups having their right to education fulfilled. Focusing on concrete strategies that allow progressive realisation of free education will be paramount to ensuring no-one is left behind. As all human rights and SDGs are interdependent, it is also very important that improved living conditions of families and students be promoted.

Overall, ensuring no-one is left behind requires strengthened public education systems which provide quality, inclusive and equitable education and learning opportunities for all children, youth and adults. At the heart of this must be a valued education community (encompassing both students/learners and teachers/educators), adequate public financing, and transparent and

participatory governance of the education system, including the management of schools and learning institutions. Marginalised sectors and those left behind must be represented in policy-making and evaluation processes at national, local and school levels. Privatisation of education, including most public-private partnership arrangements, discriminates against the poor, exacerbates inequality and promotes segregation based on socio-economic status, gender, location, and learning abilities. Governments must adopt clear and effective regulatory frameworks and enforce regulations on private sector engagement in education that will ensure non-discrimination, equity, and the right to education.

Civil society participation must be at the heart of SDG implementation

An enabling environment must be established to ensure the right to participation for citizens in debate and policy-making across the entire SDG agenda. Civil society representation and participation in decision-making, implementation, and evaluation processes must be institutionalised and backed by clear legislation and policies, including through established mechanisms at UN level and at national/state planning bodies. Such participation must be substantial, allowing for adequate speaking roles and voting rights. Local communities that are directly affected by decisions made, as well as marginalised sectors, must particularly be well-represented in such mechanisms and backed by adequate financing at all levels.

To ensure meaningful participation at each level, governments should allot resources for awareness-raising and capacity building of people and CSOs from all levels, including the grassroots. Local governments and implementing agencies should be centres for disseminating information and promoting policy development on the SDGs, and international cooperation to this end should be strengthened. Subsequent CSO participation in monitoring and reporting must be ensured from the very start, and citizen feedback should be valued and included by governments, within the fostering of a democratic culture that values dialogue. Furthermore, governments must adopt full disclosure policies that promote a culture of transparency, participation and accountability, and allow ordinary citizens and organisations access to all information.

Last but not least, governments must commit to ending immediately the criminalisation of activists and collective actors, which contradicts the spirit of CSO participation in debate and decision-making. In recent years there has been an unfortunate rise in regressive policies and legislation which have reduced the right to participation, as well as freedom of expression and association.

For the education community, the Education and Academia Stakeholder Group is in itself an important mechanism to foster CSO participation, establishing a channel of communication and way of engaging with SDG debate, awareness-raising, follow-up, monitoring, learning, and reporting. The participation of student and teacher representative organisations, particularly collective actors such as union bodies, will be crucial. Furthermore, online and community forums can be established, so that all people have a means to give voice to their perceived challenges, as well as potential solutions.

The importance of inter-sectoral approaches

Another core dimension to highlight is the importance of promoting an inter-sectoral approach in the implementation of the SDGs. Education has strong links with and impacts on other development concerns, including health, poverty eradication, income and employment, mobility, fertility, environmental protection practices, disaster mitigation, gender equality, appreciation of cultural diversity, peace, human rights, child protection, and political and community participation. In this regard, the education community must work with other sectors, and draw up a common crosscutting agenda on overall development that is coherent and complementary, and which ensures equity and social justice. An inter-sectoral approach to development planning must be advocated for with governments at the national and local levels. Existing fora and networks which seek to do this work should be nurtured and built on.

Furthermore, sharing good practice, lessons learned and research findings across the different constituencies and stakeholders, consolidating and expanding on new alliances and partnerships, should be practised regularly, leading to increasingly integrated and coordinated actions at all levels. It is important that the education community works hand-in-hand with other sectors towards the implementation of the full SDG Agenda, and collectively establish national and regional CSO platforms for inter-sectoral SDG follow-up and evaluation. Inter-sectoral analysis between targets and goals across the Agenda, based on existing and forthcoming indicators at all levels, can be produced if data capture and knowledge-sharing is cognisant of this coherent approach to working, and of the crosscutting nature of education in particular.

How to tackle follow-up and review?

Finally, we share some reflections regarding follow-up, review and accountability mechanisms that are needed to ensure no-one is left behind in the implementation of the SDG Agenda. We reiterate the importance of ensuring the participation of a wide range of stakeholders in these processes, giving CSOs from all continents due space and recognition, in particular assuring that most marginalised groups are heard and taken into account. An important aspect in this context is offering participation in all UN official languages; the English-centred processes conducted during the negotiation and adoption of the SDGs greatly limited broad participation and it is strongly felt that a different approach should be taken to ensure no-one is left behind.

Reporting and review must be evidence-based, and research and regular collection of disaggregated data will allow for accurate analysis which can illuminate a path forward. All States must ensure data is collected on the situations of marginalised communities.

Citizen data, produced through consolidated processes, should be given due recognition when monitoring progress, and 'shadow' or stakeholder reports should be considered legitimate and important instruments. Mechanisms such as policy watches, public audiences and Special Rapporteurs should also be utilised. Regarding SDG4, a dialogue between UN monitoring mechanisms and the Global Education Monitoring Report must be secured.

Furthermore, reporting and reviewing should be regular, predictable and fully transparent, using language that is accessible to all, and placed in the public domain for consultation and verification. This includes transparent access to financial information that pertains to SDG goals´ implementation, giving visibility to those areas which receive fewer resources, as is constantly the case for youth and adult education and literacy. Overall, the spirit of these processes should be learning-based, where findings are useful for governments to further SDG implementation and reorient priorities, strategies and actions.

Reporting and reviewing must be in line with existing human rights standards and treaties, including ICESCR, CRPD, CRC, CEDAW and CERD, and build on their experiences, including that of the Universal Periodic Review and Human Rights Committees.

Work on indictors must be considered 'in progress' and be open to revisions and adjustments, acknowledging their twin natures of being political and technical, and ensuring they be improved to fully reflect the spirit, breadth and depth of the SDG Agenda. Regarding education, an additional global indicator on completion of free education at primary and secondary level would strongly help both measure progress and keep governments accountable to that which has been established in target 4.1; indeed, as a community we feel that such an indicator is fundamental to ensuring that no-one is left behind.

Civil society: working together to realise the SDGs

The fledgling Education and Academia Stakeholder Group currently encompasses grassroots groups through to international federations. For this response we sought the inputs of a network of stakeholder organisations, which themselves represent diverse voices at national, regional and international levels. Respondents participated in English, French, Spanish, Arabic, or Portuguese, and this report synthesises the responses of over sixty groups.

Education is a crosscutting goal and foundational human right; it is the shared belief of the respondents to this consultation that quality, inclusive and equitable education is the basis to ensure that no-one is left behind in the implementation of the SDGs. To realise this vision, resources must be increased, sustainable, and reliable; good quality, disaggregated data must be available; and educators and learners must be involved in the decisions and policies which affect them. Fundamentally, and across all goals, civil society must be involved in the development of indicators, follow-up, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms; this role must be institutionalised in decision-making processes.