

**Written statement of the Education and Academia Stakeholder group (EASG) for the  
general debate of the 2020 High-level Political Forum/ High-level Segment of  
ECOSOC**

In Agenda 2030 and other related documents, education appears in its 'double' character: as the stand-alone Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) with 10 targets, whose conceptual background is the human rights approach; and also education as a necessary means for the implementation of several other goals, not only through three education targets under SDGs linked to health, work and climate change, but as the most sustainable way to reduce hunger, achieve equality and other goals and targets. Education and lifelong learning are considered to be powerful means of transformation, but only if they are treated as a fundamental human right and a public good. They can play an active role in promoting social, economic and environmental justice, boosting personal and community development, and supporting responsible and sustainable economic patterns.

When the world adopted Agenda 2030, there was huge hope for transformative change. Five years on in 2020, we find several very worrisome trends that threaten to change the direction of the initiative and this risks the entire implementation of Agenda 2030. UNESCO pointed out in its recent report that we are not on track and we will not achieve SDG4 unless serious rethinking and ambitious changes occur.

The worrisome tendencies are coming from different sectors of society and naming just a few will indicate the scale of the problem.

The Global Financial Crisis but also the crises that followed it produced a tectonic shift in economic, political and social models that shaped the world of education. The crisis in the welfare state had an especially negative effect on education. The denial of education as a human right and massive cuts in investments in the field of education in many countries changed the understanding of education and its practices, and access to education became

hard to get for many groups in numerous countries. The contemporary approach shifted the focus from education as a human right to the notion of human capital which understands education primarily in relation to its role in promoting economic growth. Not only did the marketization and privatization of education become mainstream, but education has also been reduced to the role of being a commodity for the industry or individual who can afford it, while the role of the state is reduced to facilitating this process. As a result of chronic, sustained underfunding, public education systems in developing countries are ill-prepared to continue operating during this pandemic as governments have failed to adequately invest in strong, flexible systems that can rapidly adapt to and continue functioning during emergencies. This situation is further compounded by debt; a **new debt crisis** is currently squeezing public spending in low income countries.

This paradigm of education and learning is jeopardizing the implementation of the SDGs. When education is seen only through the lenses of economic growth, seeing people as human resources, and culture and nature only as assets for international business, only one the economic aspect of development is boosted while social and environmental conditions are dramatically worsened. We are united in saying that “Business as usual” will not help to achieve the 2030 goals. For that purpose, education needs to be truly transformative, inspiring and supporting deep and structural changes, not only to help people to adapt to technological and other development, whose course is bringing the world to the edge at an accelerating speed. Rethinking existing patterns, finding innovative solutions of social, economic and environmental development requires education that is innovative and critical.

Another strong tendency has to do with the shrinking space and reduced resources for civil society which, around the globe, is one of the main providers of education, especially for marginalized groups. Across all regions, with the rise of authoritarian regimes, the weakening of democratic ones and a consequent restriction on the space for the voices of all people, including vulnerable and excluded groups, civil society is being squeezed out of the public sphere They are struck by unduly restrictive laws and practices on the freedom

of association and freedom of assembly and, ultimately, on democracy itself, although an independent and empowered civil society is a crucial component of a functioning democratic system. There are also fewer opportunities for broad-based dialogue on education and more limited involvement of civil society in government policy and planning processes. Thus, an important partner in the planning and monitoring of Agenda 2030 is being denied its right and role, and the education sector is losing an important pillar. There is hardly an area where the ambition “No-one-left-behind” has such an important ally and partner in its implementation, as is the case with education and lifelong learning. Millions of marginalized people get their right to education through civil society, which is also the path to their right to decent work, dignity, equality and a sustainable environment.

In spite of all these challenges, civil society is still one of the bulwarks of the right to education, one of the enablers, carriers and advocates.

## **What should be improved and implemented**

### **Integrity and Participation**

The Sustainable Development Agenda was conceived as a harmonious action plan to advance the strategic realization of human rights and the political commitments necessary to guarantee the integral development of individuals, communities and States and protect the environment.

However, we have observed that the follow-up and monitoring mechanisms of the Sustainable Development Agenda are not always effective in guaranteeing compliance, given that by nature they do not contemplate the justiciability of the State commitments, which are characteristic of the international legal systems, for instance. The United Nations Treaty Bodies do, however, promote the implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda in their fields of competence through the reporting process and thus Treaty Bodies also offer ready-made source of data to help track progress on the SDG implementation.

The complementarity between the work of the Treaty Bodies and the SDGs, is far from being comprehensive and systematic. In the same way, the goals and targets of the Sustainable Development Agenda are often treated and analyzed in a disjointed manner and therefore accountability is also fragmented so the political commitment around its implementation is more evident in certain goals and targets than in others.

This *compartmentalization* of the agenda in practice degrades certain goals and targets while highlighting others, decreases self-criticism and also deepens the differences and divisions between the so-called "Global-North-countries" and "Global-South-countries" that have shaped the power relations and development interpretation in recent decades.

In order to reinforce the integrality of the agenda, it is necessary to enhance the increasingly incisive and transparent participation of CSOs. The slogan "leave-no-one-behind" also applies to the inclusion of CSO and their tracking and monitoring mechanisms on States and the UN, otherwise the SDG Agenda risks losing impact.

Each of the SDGs is a gateway to the others and their fulfillment depends on the comprehensive progress of the entire agenda. Education (SDG4) is perhaps the best example of what an enabling right means, because by guaranteeing inclusive, quality education and lifelong learning, the achievement of the other 17 goals is boosted, and vice versa. As EASG has said before, one of the most important contributions of education is its potential to reduce gender inequalities and to eliminate gender disparities in education and work, especially by empowering girls and women and providing them equal chances through education.

### Curriculum and lifelong learning approach

The right to education is not limited to guaranteeing access to school services, but encompasses the content of education, teaching methods and school governance. The Convention on the Rights of the Child set the aims of education that States must pursue,

making it clear that education is more than schooling and encompasses a wide range of life experiences and learning processes that allow individuals to develop their personality and aptitudes to lead a full life in society, through the enjoyment and respect of human rights.

To achieve these goals, education is called to transform power relations that maintain an unjust and violent status quo.

Transformative education is an alternative framework for understanding the purposes of education and in particular the ways education quality is conceptualised and assessed. The concept of transformative education primarily refers to the emancipatory notion of change.

Envisioned as a catalyst for change, education aims to challenge unfair social structures and promotes knowledge as the way to expand individual and collective freedoms, opportunities to enjoy their human rights and contribute to a democratic and fairer society, sustainable development, global citizenship and the respect and promotion of human rights within and beyond education systems.

The notion of transformative education should be positioned at the centre of policy debates on quality of education; public authorities as well as the international community should provide the necessary attention for challenging discrimination and gender inequality and violence in curriculum development and school governance.

Beyond the specific obligations established by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, international human rights law extends those obligations to the entire population in need of education. Lifelong learning must be a reality that responds to the 750 million people worldwide who cannot read and write at the basic level of proficiency, two-thirds of them being women. The challenge of providing educational opportunities to the young and adult population depends on the urgent establishment of free state plans and programs, adapted to the social and cultural characteristics of people who work, and also of those who live in

irregular migratory situations, the elderly and disabled adults. These plans should be consistent with UNESCO's strategy, including learning that is (i) lifelong, for all age groups and throughout one's life; (ii) life-wide, through different learning settings throughout life and work; (iii) intersectoral, through embedding literacy in efforts for sustainable development in other sectors; and (iv) universal, an issue for least developed, developing and developed countries.

More than a modality, lifelong learning implies a political positioning necessary for the universalization of education and requires specific financing, to prevent commercialization trends from occupying the spaces that should be filled by public institutions.

### CSO participation in decision making

CSOs, working with broad public accountability, have a particularly central role in fostering social accountability for the full delivery of SDGs, especially SDG4.

The importance of their participation in all the processes involved in the realization of the Sustainable Development Agenda is not only due to the instrumental role that is foreseen in the literature, but also to the mandate given by the resolution A/RES/70/1 of the UN General Assembly. This resolution makes it clear that the SDGs and targets were adopted as a result of intensive public consultation and engagement with CSOs. But also, the resolution recognizes the role of these organizations in the implementation of the agenda, and encourages and promotes effective civil society partnerships.

However, we have seen that the central role that the agenda gives to CSOs is not only questioned within the UN, but also narrows day by day, as happens in many countries. Teachers and youth-led/students organizations and unions are victims of intimidation and attacks and are rarely taken into account in decision-making.

Advances in policy setting are also undermined by weak implementation and, in some countries, the trends towards the state's declining role in delivering public services has decreased accountability to citizens. Taking all of this into account points to the continuing importance and role of civil society, as a crucial actor and stakeholder in both policy setting and implementation, at global, regional and country levels, in defending the rights of the most marginalised and poorest.

Without clear decisions and policies around the central role that CSOs play in SDG implementation, the goals and targets will continue to lag and in many cases will not be fully achieved. Such decisions must be the result of dialogue, never of the imposition, much less of the denial of one of the central actors needed for the implementation of the agenda.