

Expanding Secondary Education for Development

Making the case for Secondary Provision

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Sheraton Vancouver Wall Centre, 1088 Burrard Street
Grand Ballroom A

Twenty fifteen (2015) was a landmark year for international development with the adoption of 'Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'.¹ The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets demonstrate the scale and ambition of a new universal agenda. The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon has hailed the 2030 Agenda as a "universal, transformative and integrated agenda that heralds an historic turning point for our world." The SDGs are expected to shape national government priorities, policies and financing decisions in areas from education to environment, housing to health, climate change to care and work.

The adoption of the SDGs are particularly momentous for education given that 2015 was the endpoint of the MDGs and its Goal 2 on education, but also for the Education for All (EFA) Goals first mooted in Jomtein, Thailand in 1990 and reaffirmed in Dakar, Senegal in 2000. The new education agenda encapsulated in Goal 4 - '**Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all**' - is holistic, ambitious, aspirational and universal, and inspired by a vision of education that transforms the lives of individuals, communities and societies. The agenda attends to the unfinished business of the Education for All (EFA) goals and the education-related MDGs, while effectively addressing current and future global and national education challenges.

As with the overall SDG agenda when it comes to Goal 4 – Quality Education, the Transforming our World document states in no uncertain terms that it is a supremely ambitious and transformational vision that envisages a world with universal literacy and with equitable and universal access to quality education at all levels. It commits unequivocally to 'providing inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels — early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and vocational training. All people, irrespective of sex, age, race or ethnicity, and persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations, should have access to lifelong learning

¹ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015 [without reference to a Main Committee (A/70/L.1)] 70/1. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

opportunities that help them to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to exploit opportunities and to participate fully in society.² Like the overall SDG agenda, SDG 4 and Education 2030 has also had mixed reactions especially with regard to its increased scope and level of ambition. The EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR) [renamed the GEMR] is scathing in its criticism describing the targets education as unrealistic, overambitious or too costly. They point out that such ambitious targets with 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.³

Expanding the focus beyond primary education to include universal secondary education, TVET and higher education has received some of the severest criticism. The GMR, and various academics have been especially critical in this regard. They insist that ensuring universal upper secondary education in the next 15 years is beyond the reach of most countries and that 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. The Economist critique suggests that to combat poverty in education, the focus should be limited to boosting education by extending girls' schooling by two years.⁴ Similarly, Krafft and Glewe emphasize the need for prioritisation and in particular to focus investment in pre-primary education, particularly for disadvantaged children suggesting that expanding universal secondary education is misplaced as there are unfortunately too few jobs requiring formal education to make this a good investment in some less developed countries.⁵

Most NGOs and civil society groups, however, categorically support “twelve years of free, publicly-funded formal quality education for all by 2030, nine of which should be compulsory”. **The Malala Fund's** Philippa Lei, has emphasised that *unless 12 years of primary and secondary education is provided for free, girls will continue to drop out before completing secondary schooling; and, we have to provide the means for poor girls to advance beyond eighth grade if we are to break the cycle of poverty.*

The reality lies somewhere between these two positions –the SDG agenda relative to secondary education may be too ambitious and beyond the reach of many countries. On the other hand, effective, evidence-based policies on post-primary education are of vital importance as many developing countries are starting to see a bulge in secondary and postsecondary enrolment, the product of the achievement of near-universal access to primary school.

² Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015 [without reference to a Main Committee (A/70/L.1)] 70/1. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

³ Education for All Global Monitoring Report Policy Paper 16 Where do the proposed education targets fall short? February 2015 [http://www.globaleducationfirst.org/files/PP16\(1\).pdf](http://www.globaleducationfirst.org/files/PP16(1).pdf)

⁴ <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21647286-proposed-sustainable-development-goals-would-be-worse-useless-169-commandments>

⁵ Paul Glewwe and Caroline Krafft. Benefits and Costs of the Education Targets for the Post-2015 Development Agenda Post-2015 Consensus University of Minnesota Working Paper as of July 24, 2014.

http://www.copenhagenconsensus.com/sites/default/files/education_perspective_-_glewwe_krafft_0.pdf

From 1991 to 2013, primary and secondary enrolment rates have increased in all regions of the developing world, so that currently gross primary enrolment rates are near or above 100 percent everywhere in the world, and gross secondary enrolment rates are above 50 percent everywhere except in Sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, primary school completion rates have increased almost everywhere between 1991 and 2013. At the global level, the UIS estimates that in 2013 primary completion rates (as measured by the gross intake rate to the last grade of primary education) were as high as 92%, although regional values ranged from 69% in sub-Saharan Africa to 105% in Asia and the Pacific.⁶

Globally, participation in upper secondary education is also on the increase with gross enrolment at 63% in 2013 compared to 45% in 1999. The greatest progress in upper secondary GER was made in East Asia and the Pacific, where the regional GER rose from 45% to 78% between 1999 and 2013, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (62% to 80%). In contrast Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest regional GER for upper secondary education: 35% in 2013 compared to 20% in 1999.⁷

Given that higher levels of skills are being demanded in the labour market greater priority should, thus, be given to the transition from primary to lower and upper secondary education. The majority of the children now reaching the last grade of the primary cycle are unable to pursue secondary education. Moreover, of those excluded at a country level, a disproportionate number come from marginalized groups (e.g. girls or ethnic, religious, and geographic groups). Given this situation, argument for not trying to achieve universal secondary are short sighted especially when such a position is justified from an equity perspective. There are many potential reasons for the bottlenecks, including the direct and indirect costs of education (i.e. tuition fees, school uniforms, and time away from household chores or external employment). In addition, many countries are simply unable to meet the growing demand for education.

Recent research estimates that if we continue with business as usual, we will not reach the United Nations' global Sustainable Development Goal of all children completing secondary school with quality learning outcomes. According to projections by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), if we continue down our current path, it will be decades until all youth have completed secondary education. By 2030, the deadline for the UN's global Sustainable Development Goals, only 85 percent of the world's 20 to 24 year olds will have completed secondary school. In order to reach 100 percent, ODI estimates that progress would need to be nearly three times faster than current rates (see Figure X). A major reason for the slow progress has to do with regional inequality. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, only 64 percent of youth will have completed secondary school if we continue on our current trajectory.⁸

Figure X: Reaching Universal Secondary Education – Projected Gap

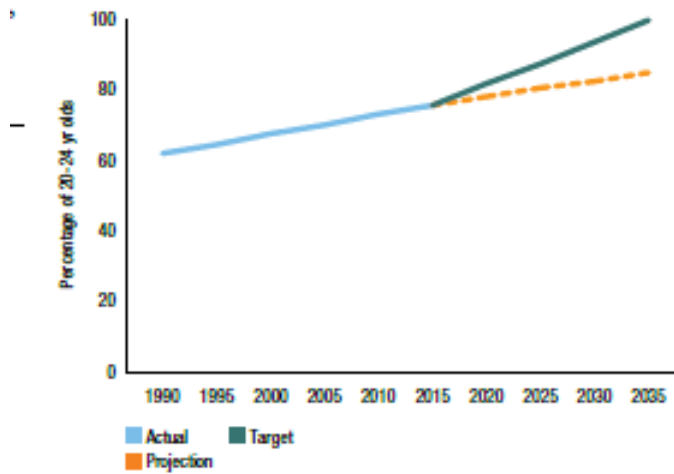
⁶ UIS Global Education Digest 2011

http://www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/global_education_digest_2011_en.pdf

⁷ UIS

⁸ Susan Nicolai, Chris Hoy, Tom Berliner, and Thomas Aedy, "Projecting Progress: Reaching the SDGs by 2030," *Overseas Development Institute*, September 2015, <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9938.pdf>.

Figure 6: Projections for SDG Target 4.1 Universal secondary education



Source: World Bank, 2015

Addressing this challenge is bound to be complex and somewhat daunting. Besides the substantially greater finances and resources and the very large numbers of teachers capable of teaching at advanced levels, countries will need to deal with the quality of teaching and learning, relevant pedagogy, the curriculum design, and so on. Meeting these challenges will require a combination of using existing resources more effectively – which requires both understanding which inputs are key and which are not—and a range of innovations that may fundamentally alter the current methods of instruction.⁹

Finding ways to deliver and promote access to high-quality post-primary education, and to ensure that education is relevant to labor market needs is a challenge we must address - the benefits outweigh the costs. Literacy and numeracy are essential skills for living in the 21st century, but so too are competencies such as teamwork, communication, and critical thinking. Employer surveys, labor market analyses, and academic studies all point to the importance of so-called 21st century skills in work and find that across the board, these are lacking. And in most cases primary education is inadequate for developing such skills.

New research proves the long held expectation that human capital formation (a population's education and health status) plays a significant role in a country's economic development. Better education leads not only to higher individual income but is also a necessary (although not always sufficient) precondition for long-term economic growth. Across the 50 countries, each additional year of average schooling in a country increased the average 40-year growth rate in GDP by about 0.37 percentage points. Lifting it by 0.37 percentage points is a boost to annual growth rates of more than 10 percent of what would otherwise have occurred, a significant amount. But the impact of improved cognitive skills, as measured by the

⁹ Abhijit Banerjee, Paul Glewwe, Shawn Powers, and Melanie Wasserman 2013. *Expanding Access and Increasing Student Learning in Post-Primary Education in Developing Countries: A Review of the Evidence*. Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) Post-Primary Education Initiative Review Paper2 <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/publications/PPE%20Review%20Paper%20April%202013.pdf>

performance of students on math and science tests, is considerably larger - If one country's test-score performance was 0.5 standard deviations higher than another country during the 1960s—a little less than the current difference in the scores between such top-performing countries as Finland and Hong Kong and the United States—the first country's growth rate was, on average, one full percentage point higher annually over the following 40-year period than the second country's growth rate. Such analyses point out that increases years of educational attainment alone is not enough – a country benefits from asking its students to remain in school for a longer period of time only if the students are learning something as a consequence.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Eric A. Hanushek, Dean T. Jamison, Eliot A. Jamison and Ludger Woessmann. Education and Economic Growth -It's not just going to school, but learning something while there that matters. Education Next SPRING 2008 / VOL. 8, NO. 2 <http://educationnext.org/education-and-economic-growth/>*