

Education for Sustainable Development or Sustainable Educational Development?

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Good things sometimes benefit from considered reflection, slow maturation and repeated road testing. Time will tell if the SDGs are as durable as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and whether the evident limitations of the MDGs have been addressed by the SDGs. There are now 17 SDGs and 169 Associated Targets, which can be compared with the 8 goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators of the MDGs one of which was specifically educational (universalizing access to basic education), and another (gender equity) was cast partly in educational terms. Education now has [10 targets](#) and at least 42 indicators, with more likely to be invented. Both the Jomtien and Dakar global education conferences that defined 'Education for All' had a single goal and six educational targets. A rule of thumb in cognitive psychology is that most people can only remember seven things at a time plus or minus two, so Jomtien and Dakar met this criteria. The SDGs stretch the memory envelope. This may have occurred to the drafters of the SDGs who, when they reached SDG target number 164, decided there was a need to "Enhance Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development". 164 targets is a lot to interrelate and cohere.

The targets for educational development fall under the super goal 4 which is to '*ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*'. The commitment to this goal is familiar not only because of its recent global promotion, but also because it encapsulates the welcome commitment that "*Every person - child, youth and adult - shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs....Basic education is more than an end in itself. It is the foundation for lifelong learning and human development on which countries may build further levels and types of education and training*". But this last commitment is not new. It was made in 1990 at Jomtien and reaffirmed at Dakar in 2000!

The worrying thought is that the super-goal and the 10 new targets for education neither break new ground by being specific about what makes them likely to contribute to sustained development, nor do they provide criteria for indicators that would create a step change that goes beyond the aspirations of the past. The question remains 'what is it about the SDGs that could lead to a more sustainable form of development?' If the specification of Goal 4 is read on its own it appears substantially similar to the Jomtien and Dakar goals and targets. There is nothing in the text that really explains how the new education goal and ten targets are any more or less likely to lead to sustainable development than the previous sets of goals and targets targets ([Open Society Foundations 2015](#)). Or how the new goals and targets for education will relate to all the other SDGs most of which have educational dimensions. Or why "reaching the furthest behind first" makes sense where failure to deliver services may be systemic, rather than on the margin of fundamentally sound education systems.

The text claims to offer a 'new agenda' for sustainable development but finding what is new remains elusive. Education is mentioned 24 times in the draft. On all but two occasions the reference is to greater access to education as a necessary component of development which is of course the agenda of EFA. There is little guidance as to what might matter for sustainability. In the ten targets for education in Goal 4, sustainability is only mentioned in one. [Target 4.7](#) seeks to "*ensure 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*". This catch all target statement embraces at least ten sub targets, suggesting a lack of focus. It also evades many awkward questions. For example, without a global State with agreed governance and appropriate powers, can there be global citizens with global rights and responsibilities? Full citizenship of a country, which is denied to so many internally displaced and cross border migrants, is surely a greater priority and is a necessary precursor to global citizenship. Can we name a global citizen (who is not a celebrity), and can we agree their attributes? It is a matter of taste as to whether target 4.7 improves on an earlier target for sustainable development in 1990 which was "*Increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills and values required for better living and sound and sustainable development, made available through all education channels including the mass media, other forms of modern and traditional communication, and social action, with effectiveness assessed in terms of behavioural change*" ([Framework for Action, Meeting Basic Learning Needs, 1990](#)).

In his contribution, David Post argues that the SDGs focus on “urgent demands to understand how education does and does not contribute to environmental stewardship”. The second reference to education and sustainable development in the ESD targets appears not in Goal 4 at all but in Goal 13 on the need to combat climate change. [Target 13.3](#) of the SDGs is to “*Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning*” But why is this not an education target and why does sustainability collapse largely into concerns for climate change? If rogue States really do possess the nuclear devices and use them irresponsibly the effect on sustained development will be catastrophic. So also will civil conflicts that undermine social cohesion.

The proposed indicator of “the percentage of 15 year olds who have proficiency in knowledge of environmental science and geoscience” is a great idea, especially given that currently only a small minority of the world’s children study environmental and geo science in any depth at the age of 15. But it is wholly disappointing as an adequate interpretation of the kind of broad spectrum concerns that ESD should have beyond climate change, with an eye on valuing the future rather than merely satisfying the desires of the present. Asking adults if they want to prioritise protecting the environment “even if it causes slower economic growth and some loss of jobs” across 22 countries in the World Values Survey, begs more questions than it asks. For the informed respondent it is likely to be impossible to answer – protecting which environment from what? Slower growth of what kind? How slow? And is the loss of jobs mine or yours? ESD is worth more robust exploration and a much more expansive set of concerns.

The basic problem is that the SDG text and its elaborations leave open whether it is promoting *sustainable educational development (SED)* or *education for sustainable development (ESD)*. It lingers longer on the SED than ESD yet the latter is the core issue. Is it unreasonable to expect more clues as to what should go into the 15,000 hours of school that the SDGs anticipate for all children? What would constitute an education fit for purpose in the 21st century that is different to that which proved so successful in many countries in the 20th century?

What would close the cognitive chasm that exists between the achievement of 15 year olds in different countries that is equivalent to six years of schooling? What would reduce the current differences between the richest and the poorest students within low income countries which mean that the highest scoring students perform at rich country levels, and the lowest simply fail to score? How can all 15 year olds understand enough science and technology, and logical reasoning, to have an informed view on climate change, pollution, urbanization, and epidemic and endemic diseases? What kind of citizenship education might contribute positively to reductions in conflict and levels of distressed migration and would global citizenship add any value? What competencies related to health and wellbeing, and environmental economics, should every 15 year old have? We should all encourage the ESD dialogue to be more explicit about what it values and why in terms of cognition and affect.

Steve Klees is right to draw attention to the broken promises of Dakar, but who broke which promise and why? Making rights realities requires sustained political will over and above signing declarations. At Jomtien and Dakar it was bilateral and multilateral agencies who promised sufficient financing to achieve Education for All. They needed a persistence of purpose not evident in the first decade after the declaration. Their developing country partners needed the complementary ambition and political will as well as the resources to make EFA materialize. Those that had this made good progress. Those that did not stagnated and fell far short of the EFA targets ([IIEP 2015](#)).

The bilateral development partners certainly fell short of providing the resources needed for EFA. We estimated the gap in financing at Jomtien in 1990 to be about 2.5 billion USD a year to support the additional recurrent costs of EFA assuming plausible reforms to increase efficiency. By Dakar in 2000 the estimate had risen to 5.5 billion USD per year ([Global Monitoring Report 2002](#)) and by 2008 to over 8 billion USD per year ([World Bank](#)



Source: Keith Lewin

Caption: A Debilitating Haze of Air Pollution

Levels of air pollution in parts of India and China can now exceed 10 times the WHO safe levels for particulates (PM 2.5 and PM 10). Education for sustainable development could mean all citizens understood that this would shorten their lives and that some kinds of economic growth have a price that is probably not worth paying, especially for those who cannot afford air conditioning and air filtration.

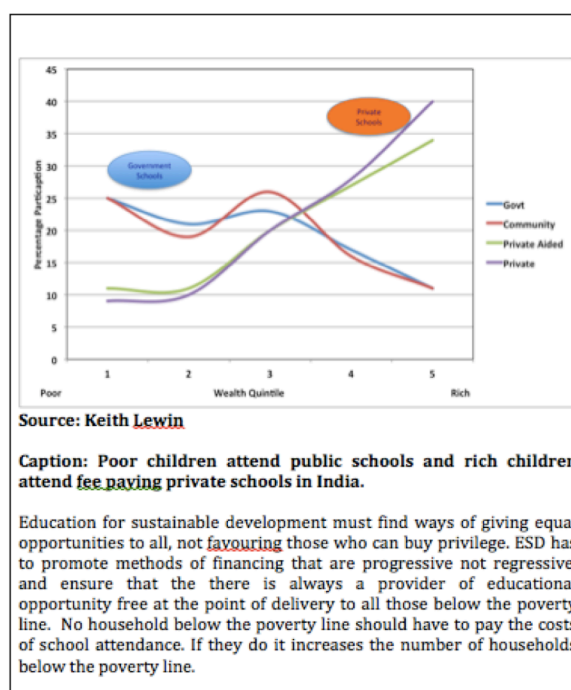
2008). By 2015 the GMR was estimating the financing gap at over 40 billion USD a year. At best the resources provided by all aid to basic education in 2015 appear to have been averaging only 5 billion USD a year and may now be falling. This impressive inflation of the financing gap may reflect mission creep, greater needs, habituation to over promising, or some mixture of all three. Bridging the new gap with aid may no longer be a feasible promise, given the apparent unwillingness of development partners to commit to specific and predictable flows of assistance to education country by country, or even in the aggregate.

Multi national corporates should pay taxes in the countries which generate their revenues. This is self evident. Low income countries might then be able to afford public services of enhanced quality and reach. The problem with global taxation systems, and for that matter Tobin taxes, is not so much how to collect revenues, but how to determine who should decide how they are to be used in the absence of an accountable system of global governance.

At the [2015 World Education Forum in Incheon](#) there was a clear intention to shift the locus of responsibility for educational development back to the countries with less than universal enrolments, and extend the obligations of EFA and the SDGs to countries with low levels of measured learning outcomes. Symbolically the original [Fast Track Initiative](#) (FTI), which was set up to accelerate progress on EFA, linked activity on EFA to its own budget which was typically less than a billion USD a year, and sometimes a lot less. After the FTI morphed into the Global Partnership for Education it claimed in 2014 to have mobilized pledges for 28 billion USD worth of resources for EFA. But 26 billion USD of this was from national budgets¹ not from the development partners, and it was not clear how the pledges were to be tracked into disbursements, and what the consequences would be of falling short on realising the pledges.

This shift in attribution of responsibilities for education and development – from the idea that educational development requires external assistance in poorer countries to the idea that poorer countries have to do it largely for themselves - seems to have passed unnoticed. But perhaps this is a good thing for sustainability. External assistance invokes dependence unless it is constructed with a viable exit route that no longer requires concessional aid at some point in the future. The time scale may be long or short, but if aid has no end then the development it supports is not systemically sustainable. This in no way absolves rich countries from their promises to support universal access education. Or from their reciprocal interests in sponsoring strategic investments in education that lead to development that delivers the rights that fire the imagination and underpin all modern societies. But what is the kind of aid that leads to sustainable educational development (SED). No new definition is on offer but one is needed that is focused on diminishing and eliminating funding gaps over time.

Many more questions nag away. The SDGs are a list not a recipe, as was also true of the MDGs. Achieving all the SDGs may make the world a better place. There is a broad consensus that most of the outcomes they flag are desirable. However, all the Goals taken together are no guarantee that development will take place, and are not in themselves the basis for a development strategy. They are context blind, and insensitive to the priorities that all governments have to identify. The Goals are not distributional in character.. This is a major omission if poverty is partly the product of the distribution of wealth as well as its generation, and inequality is an endemic source of conflict. Moreover, the SDGs are presented statically, with no obvious mechanisms to evolve dynamically. The MDGs remained enshrined in stone (or cast in concrete) for 15 years. This is longer than any corporate development strategy is likely to be relevant, and longer than most national governments last in democratic states. Those who snooze may well lose, and hang on to priorities overtaken by events linked to climate



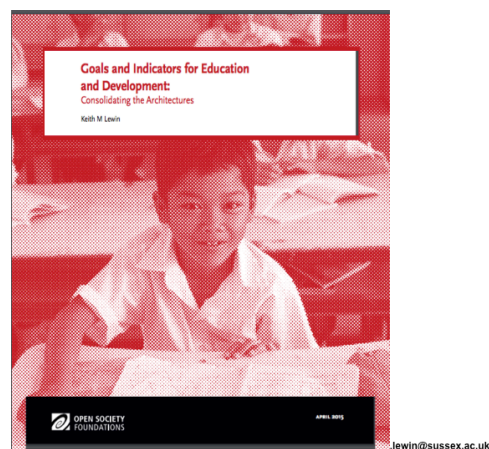
¹ <http://www.globalpartnership.org/news/press-release-record-28-5-billion-us-dollars-pledged-global-education>

processes, social movements and economic realities that have a global momentum. The SDGs should be conceived of as dynamic, responsive and iterated with changing circumstance if they are to be durable and resilient over 15 years. That would be an advance over the MDGs.

Education is at the heart of development and learning creates and transfers capabilities. It may not guarantee enlightenment and freedom from superstition but it makes it more likely. The SDGs locate education more as part of the definition of development than as a means to achieve it and fail to advance discussion of what kind of education is to be valued for what purpose. An opportunity has been missed to dwell more on the curriculum and pedagogic reforms that could transform minds, hands and hearts and offer insight into what education designed to promote development that is climate friendly, human rights respectful, and economically advantageous might look like. SED is the agenda of EFA. ESD needs to be much more than SED if it is to support reforms that are both disruptive and constructive.

We have yet to map “the road to sustainable development” as the SDG document claims in a triumph of aspiration over cartography. The [Brundtland Commission of 1987](#) introduced the idea of sustainable development into mainstream development theory. Brundtland’s criterion was that ‘the needs of the present are met without compromising the needs of the future’. This is the key challenge to those who want to go beyond Jomtien and Dakar and develop ESD post Incheon. What would be different under a ESD frame of reference rather than a revitalized EFA business as usual framework? Who would go to what kind of educational institutions and how would they be selected? How and why would they choose which educational programme? Who would certify the programmes and who would recognize the qualifications? How would the interests of individuals be balanced with the needs of communities and nation states? How would access and outcome become more equitable across generations? What would teachers do that was different? How would public education be financed for whose benefit? How would the private providers be regulated and how should the adverse effects of marketisation on equity, access and exclusion be mediated? How would the curriculum and pedagogy change? What trade offs would be needed between benefits in the future and benefits in the present? What kind of discount rate should be applied? Should development assistance be contracted against performance targets linked to sustained development? How should the UN architecture around ESD be refashioned to fit its new purposes?

These are the debates that must be addressed if the story of the SDGs in 2030 is to be different to the MDGs and EFA. Those of us who are optimists think there is time to act and address the hard questions that should define ESD. The window of opportunity short. The world is a very different place than it was in 1990 and 2000 when Education for All was born and evolved. The case for collective action to understand and limit the destructive physical burdens of humanity on the planet is supported by a mountain of scientific evidence on environmental changes. Social cohesion is widely thought to be becoming more fragile. It is more important than ever that this generation promotes education that promotes understanding and reshapes the preferences of the next generation to eschew conflict, provide for universal basic needs, and respect the planet. ESD needs to be informed by hypotheses rather than hyperbole, analysis rather than supposition, and equity rather than inequality.



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