

# **UN SYSTEM TASK TEAM ON THE **POST-2015** UN DEVELOPMENT AGENDA**



## **Education and skills for inclusive and sustainable development beyond 2015**

**Thematic Think Piece**

**UNESCO\***

The views expressed in this paper are those of the signing agencies and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

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\*With valuable contributions from DESA, ITU and UNITAR



Following on the outcome of the 2010 High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations Secretary-General established the UN System Task Team in September 2011 to support UN system-wide preparations for the post-2015 UN development agenda, in consultation with all stakeholders. The Task Team is led by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Development Programme and brings together senior experts from over 50 UN entities and international organizations to provide system-wide support to the post-2015 consultation process, including analytical input, expertise and outreach.

# Education and skills for inclusive and sustainable development beyond 2015

## 1. Enabling and driving inclusive and sustainable development

Education, or the transmission, acquisition, creation and adaptation of information, knowledge, skills and values, is a key lever of sustainable development. This is based on a vision of inclusive societies in which all citizens have equitable opportunities to access effective and relevant learning throughout life delivered through multiple formal, non-formal and informal settings. As such, education is essential to individuals' development as it is to the development of their families, of the local and national communities to which they belong, and to the world at large. As a fundamental human right enshrined in a number of international normative frameworks,<sup>1</sup> and built into most national legislation,<sup>2</sup> the right to education is to be seen as an enabling right for the realization of other economic, social and cultural rights, as well as a catalyst for positive societal change,<sup>3</sup> social justice and peace.

There is an important body of development literature that has long documented the positive impact of basic education on various facets of social and economic development.<sup>4</sup> It is well-established that education is an important catalyst for achieving all development goals. It has been recognized that, within the MDG framework, there is “an interconnectedness of all development goals with key inter-linkages between education, health, poverty reduction, and gender equality, where improvement in one area has a positive effect on the others”.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in the same way that education has positive effects on health, poverty reduction and elimination of hunger, as well as on gender equality, each, in

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1 Foremost among these international normative frameworks are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 26), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (art. 13), as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (art. 28).

2 An estimated 90 percent of all countries have legally-binding regulations requiring children to attend school (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009).

3 See, for example, Drèze and Sen (1995), *India, Economic Development and Social Opportunity*, Delhi: Oxford University Press

4 These have been extensively reviewed in successive issues of the UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Reports

5 Report of the Secretary-General, *Implementing the Internationally Agreed Goals and Commitments in Regard to Education*, E/2011/L.28 (New York, 2011)

turn, has a positive effect on education. Higher levels of more relevant learning outcomes are thus both a condition for, as well as a result of, progress in other social sectors.

Beyond its well-established socio-economic role, education also has a crucial socialization function through the shaping of personal and collective identities, the formation of responsible citizenship and the promotion of critical social participation, based on principles of respect for life, human dignity and cultural diversity. Promoting respect for diversity within a human rights-based approach can facilitate intercultural dialogue, help prevent conflict and protect the rights of marginalized groups, thus creating optimal conditions for achieving development goals.

## **2. Trends in international educational development**

If education, learning and skills are to be seen as both enablers and drivers of inclusive and sustainable development, it is important to review the experience of education within the framework of the international development agenda. The more comprehensive international education agenda is that of the six 'Education for All' (EFA) goals adopted in the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action. The annual EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR) has been monitoring progress towards these goals since 2002/03. What do these trends tell us that can help define future perspectives?

While there has been rapid progress made in expanding access to formal basic education worldwide, significant inequalities between countries persist, and national averages in many countries continue to mask striking inequalities in levels of educational attainment and outcomes. Traditional factors of marginalization in education such as gender and urban/rural residence continue to combine with income, language, minority status, HIV and AIDS, age (particularly in the case of young adolescent girls), and disability, to create "mutually reinforcing disadvantages", particularly so in low-income and conflict-affected countries.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, EFA Global Monitoring Report (Paris, 2011)

With the growing recognition of the challenges of “reaching the unreached”, there is a need to better exploit more disaggregated data (such as household, health and labour survey data) in order to better identify reasons for exclusion or disengagement from formal and non-formal learning opportunities, in view of putting in place more targeted strategies for the most vulnerable children, youth and adults. This has led some countries, in order to reach the hard to reach children, to include education as an integral part of social protection programs.

The expansion in access to basic formal education has also resulted in a shift from a quantitative focus on access and participation in formal education to a concern with qualitative aspects and the results of learning and their social distribution. The expansion of access to primary education has also resulted in the recognition of a growing demand for secondary and tertiary education and increasing concern for vocational skills development, particularly in a context of growing youth unemployment. Indeed, too many young people and adults are currently unable to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes they need for today’s rapidly changing technologies and world of work.

This inadequate access to higher levels of learning is resulting in a knowledge divide that includes the ‘e-literacy’ gap. The ‘e-literacy’ gap is further pronounced between genders, where girls generally have a lower literacy rate. These trends have significant consequences in today’s technology-driven world, where lack of ICT knowledge limits employment opportunities.

In addition to insufficient quality of learning at basic education, we also have witnessed little progress on other EFA goals like Early Child Care and Education, Life skills and Literacy. In the perspective of lifelong learning, it is evident that exclusion from the learning process starts early. There is strong evidence that nutrition and cognitive stimulation in the early years of a child’s life is critical in forming the ability to learn later in life. This is particular relevant with regard to developing skills like creativity, flexibility and problems solving, skills that are coming more in demand in the knowledge economy.

In many countries too many children are learning far too little, and children leave school without having obtained fundamental learning skills. In this way many children and youth

are excluded because they do not acquire basic skills like literacy and numeracy which are critical for further learning. This has led to a stronger focus on the quality of early education as a foundation for learning.

Finally, there is a growing awareness of the pressures being placed on public financing of education. This has resulted in the need to seek more efficient use of these limited resources, ensure greater accountability in the investment of public resources for education, and ways in which to supplement these public resources through greater fiscal capacity, new partnerships with non-public actors, as well as through advocacy for increased official development assistance.

Beyond these trends, however, it is important to underline that the MDG framework narrowed the international education agenda to Universal Primary Education (UPE) and gender equality (narrowly equated with parity). More importantly, however, the narrower MDG focus resulted in a neglect of a broader vision of EFA that encompasses – within its vision of basic learning – early childhood care and education, youth and adult literacy, vocational skills development, as well as concern for the improvement of the quality and relevance of basic learning. On the other hand it can be argued that without this strong focus on enrolment it would not have been possible to change the trend of a growing number of out of school children, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia. This shows that setting ambitious targets can have an attribution effect, in this case leading to many countries increasing education budgets and donors scaling up support.

With the education-related goals set within the comprehensive international MDG framework confined to primary enrolment and gender parity, the perceived relevance of the international education agenda for middle and upper-income countries began to wane as many of these countries had achieved or were close to achieving these goals. Any discussion of an international education agenda beyond 2015 would have to move beyond the traditional view of education embedded in the logic of North-South international aid, to one of global relevance. In this respect the quality of learning in the perspective of equity comes out as a universal issue that every country will have to relate to.

### 3. The international education agenda beyond 2015

With a stronger focus on sustainable human development, equity and inclusive growth, education should be at the center of the international development agenda beyond 2015.

In education there are also several strands of discussion within the current context of review of the MDG and EFA experience (2000-2015) and thinking about the possible process, format and content of the post-2015 international development agenda, and the ways in which these are inter-related.

In terms of process, some of the discussion has to do with the usefulness of setting targets at the international level on the grounds that such 'one-size fits all' global targets may be considered to be of greater or lesser relevance to countries depending on their specific development challenges. For instance, meaningful targets for an overall goal aimed at "improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills" (EFA Goal 6) can arguably only be realistically set at the national level. This is grounded in the assumption that each country has its own evolving conceptualization of the quality of education in terms of the performance of the system and the relevance of learning outcomes in specific development contexts. It is this conceptualization that would constitute the basis of national target-setting and subsequent selection of indicators to monitor progress in the realization of the overall goal of "improving all aspects of the quality of education". An issue will therefore be how to define quality in the perspective of national development needs and how to measure this.

The experience of global-target setting within the MDG and EFA experience since 2000 has encouraged reporting of aggregate national data, thereby masking the extent of inequality and disparity within countries. If our concern is with equity and our focus on reducing the observed trend towards widening inequality worldwide - and resulting exclusion from the benefits associated with positive societal development - then national target-setting would allow for the reporting of much more disaggregated data beyond traditional factors of discrimination such as gender and urban/rural residence. Indeed, such factors are often

further compounded by other factors of disparity for example linked to language to create “mutually reinforcing disadvantages” and “complex patterns of marginalization”.<sup>7</sup>

The starting point for the focus in education should be equity. That could imply that each of the education goals should have an equity focus (e.g. measuring progress for the bottom 20%, by rural/urban and gender). Given that the MDG on primary school completion has not yet been achieved, and those left behind are from the poorest households, living in rural areas or urban slums, and most often girls,<sup>8</sup> access to basic education needs to remain a focus.

Ensuring quality learning and equity will require better targeting of poor and marginalized groups. As the provision of free basic education is defined as a basic human right, this will imply bringing in systems of accountability that better monitor delivery of education services. In this perspective, bringing in the voice of the learners will be critical in monitoring progress. Particular the voice of youth should be strengthened in order to ensure that learners are provided with skills to manage a successful transition to adult life and the work force.

With a combined concern for equity and quality of education, interest has gradually shifted to a focus on the results of the educational processes in terms of learning outcomes, as well as on their social distribution. Seeing the international education agenda as “unfinished business”, a focus on learning, on what is actually learned (knowledge, skills, competencies and values) - rather than on mere participation in educational processes - is also based on the recognition of the limits of traditional proxy indicators (such as pupil/teacher ratios, share of qualified teachers, and mean years of schooling) in gauging the quality of learning and the contribution of education to inclusive and equitable development. In response to these limitations, there is an emerging interest in better measurement and the assessment of the results of learning at various levels. Caution, however, needs to be exercised in relation to the recent emphasis on large-scale assessments of learning outcomes; it may be

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<sup>7</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, EFA Global Monitoring Report (Paris, 2011); Report of the Secretary-General, E/2011/L.28, Implementing the Internationally Agreed Goals and Commitments in Regard to Education (New York, 2011)

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, EFA Global Monitoring Report (Paris, 2010)



argued that learning assessments should necessarily be grounded in local contexts and needs, if they are to be relevant for national educational processes.

It might be helpful in the context of the improvement of the quality of national education systems, to balance the focus on outcome targets at the global level, with more focus on process targets and meeting acceptable standards at the country level. Indeed, process targets and indicators may be better suited to report on: (1) national efforts made to monitor levels of learning and skills, as well as their social distribution, and (2) the use of such data in informing strategic interventions to improve the general levels of learning and skills and ensure their more equitable distribution. Such process targets and indicators would allow national education authorities to be more accountable regarding the results of public investment in education.<sup>9</sup>

## 4. Emerging trends and the future of education

The current context of global development is characterized by widening inequalities observed in many countries, growing youth unemployment,<sup>10</sup> rising vulnerable employment,<sup>11</sup> and the increasing concentration of the poor in middle-income countries and in fragile states,<sup>12</sup> all of which are exacerbating social exclusion and undermining social cohesion.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the diversification in sources of information, the continued acceleration in the production of and circulation of knowledge, combined with the development of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and digital media, explain the emergence of new forms of civic and political socialisation and mobilisation in the context of the knowledge society.

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9 See, for example, the discussion in Barrett (2011). “A Millennium Learning Goal for Education post-2015: A question of outcome or processes”, *Comparative Education*, 47(1), pp. 119-133.

10 With almost 75 million young people under the age of 25 years of age out of the total of 200 million unemployed persons, global unemployment is clearly mainly affecting youth, see International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends 2012: Preventing a deeper jobs crisis* (Geneva, 2012).

11 According to latest International Labour Organization (Ibid) figures, vulnerable employment is on the rise mainly in sub-Saharan Africa (22 million persons) and in South Asia (12 million persons).

12 United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2011* (New York, 2011)

13 Vandermoortele (2009), “The MDG Conundrum: Meeting the Targets Without Missing the Point”, *Development Policy Review*, 27:4, pp. 355 - 371

## **The growth of information and its changing nature**

With the continued development of knowledge societies, the influence of new technologies on the creation of knowledge is growing. Not only are the rate of production and the volume of information continuing to grow exponentially, but information is also less and less dependent on text-based transmission and increasingly includes audio, graphic, and visual supports through a variety of media. The exponential growth in the volume of information and its changing nature are questioning the very notions of the authority of traditional bodies of knowledge controlled by legitimate educational institutions.

## **A shift away from teaching to an increased focus on learning**

With formal education traditionally emphasising teaching more than learning, education systems have focused on the transfer of information and knowledge from the teacher to the learner. Such a teacher-dependent education system is also “time-dependent, location-dependent, and situation-dependent”.<sup>14</sup> With the multiplication of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and digital media, sources of information, knowledge and values are becoming more diversified and accessible beyond the confines of formal education systems. Recognizing that learning is increasingly happening individually beyond formal educational settings, the role of teachers will have to evolve from dispensers of information and knowledge to facilitators and enablers of learning.

## **Lifelong learning: Beyond a classroom-centred paradigm of education**

Learning in formal education systems has long been associated with classroom teaching. While a great deal of learning covered by formal education may take place at home, at school, and elsewhere in the form of homework, reading and preparation for examinations, the physical space defined by the classroom remains a central feature of formal education systems at all levels of learning.<sup>15</sup>

Although the lifelong learning paradigm is not new,<sup>16</sup> recent developments are reinvigorating the relevance of life-long education. These developments include the

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<sup>14</sup> Frey (2010)

<sup>15</sup> What Frey refers to as ‘classroom-centric’ learning.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Learning to Be (Paris, 1972)

continuously quickening pace of technological and scientific development, the exponential growth and changing nature of information, the gradual erosion of the monopoly of authority by traditional sources of knowledge, such as teachers, professors, specialists, as well as the increasingly challenging task of forecasting the emergence of new professions and associated skills needs.

### **Future learning: Blurring boundaries between learning, working and living**

Many countries have placed work-based learning for youth and adults at the centre of their approach to vocational skills. Internship and apprenticeship are going through a worldwide upswing. The key challenge remains to ensure that the life-long characteristics of workplace learning are reflected in education and skills strategies and policies. These include development of new approaches for recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning and enabling flexible access to skills development and qualifications.

In many developing countries, skills development in the informal sectors of the economy is a principal route to skills and work for large numbers of workers, but is often of low quality and continues to receive relatively little policy attention. There is a need for new skills development approaches that capitalize on the full potential of all learning settings.

From the content of learning to a focus on assessment and validation of learning

The growing recognition of the importance of learning and relearning taking place outside the formal education and training systems raises the issue of the recognition, assessment and validation of learning acquired through self-learning, peer-learning, on-the-job training, or through other experiences beyond formal education. From a traditional focus on the content of learning programmes and teaching/learning methods, the focus is now shifting to the recognition, assessment and validation of knowledge and skills. In addition to the recent focus on the assessment of learning outcomes among children and youth, there is also evidence of increasing attention paid to the measurement of skills levels and the efficient matching of these skills with those required by the world of work. This is being done either

through the development of outcome-based national/vocational qualifications frameworks, or through large-scale assessments of skills levels among adults.<sup>17</sup>

### **Rising skills requirements and foundational skills**

While progress continues to be made in reducing illiteracy worldwide and in narrowing gender gaps in access to basic literacy and numeracy skills, particularly among youth - essentially as a result of the expansion of access to formal education systems - there are still an estimated 800 million illiterate youth and adults worldwide.<sup>18</sup> Not only does illiteracy continue to represent a persistent challenge, but notions of what constitutes a minimum threshold of functional literacy are changing as a result of progress in science and technology and the development of the knowledge society. Skills associated with the use of new digital media in our everyday lives are evolving and becoming more complex. Beyond minimalistic definitions of literacy and numeracy skills, educational development must address the issue of adequate literacy, information and media literacy required in the information and digital age and appropriate means of assessing these skills levels.

The most recent developments in the knowledge society and the subsequent changes in the world of work at the global level are raising skill/qualification requirements for job entry and subsequently demand for a more knowledgeable and skilled workforce. At the same time, a growing body of evidence suggests that the formation of skills is a life-cycle process that exhibits dynamic complementarities. In the process, foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy have often not been sufficiently recognized. Without these fundamentals, learners have difficulty to access vocational learning and can never attain the level of skills that will enable them to make informed choices with regard to the life of work. It is also clear that in many countries the lack of relevance of instruction, often focusing on traditional rote learning and passing of exams, is not adapted to the needs of the labour market. As a result large segments of educated youth are excluded from the life of work.

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, ETF inventory, 2010; CEDEFOP (2011); ILO (2010); PIACC etc.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, EFA Global Monitoring Report (Paris, 2011)

### **Employability challenges: Facilitating transition from school to work**

High rates of youth unemployment have become a structural problem in many countries. This situation denies opportunities for millions of youth to make their creative contributions to society. As well as being a threat to social cohesion, the weak labour market integration of youth is a loss to development as a whole. A persistent challenge for education and skills development policies is therefore to assist youth in learning skills for successful transitions between learning and work. In many countries, a key challenge is about opening up for women who are traditionally marginalized in the labor market and for the huge numbers of young people who lack foundations skills or have completed basic education and yet have few prospects of decent work.

Increasing employability requires that two dimensions be considered relating to both short- and long-term perspectives. The first perspective refers to the capacity of graduates to seize immediate employment opportunities and to address constraints arising from the labour market. The second is the capacity to stay in employment, and to move on in the workplace and more broadly in lifelong learning. A greater emphasis should be placed on knowing how to use the tools for navigating in the world of work and seeking further learning. This means that education policies and programmes must be built on the basis of a careful analysis of the needs and aspirations of the individuals, enterprises and societies in question and that they must be owned by all relevant stakeholders.

### **Anticipating change**

In this context, the design of effective education and skills policies is challenged by the difficulty of anticipating change. There is a need to develop more responsive education and skills policies that include greater diversification and flexibility and that allow for the adaptation of skill supply to rapidly changing needs and ensure that individuals are better equipped to be more resilient and can learn to develop and apply career adaptive competencies most effectively.

This should also include increasing the capacity of education and skills development systems to identify skills needs early on, as well as anticipate their evolution, and make better use of labour market information for matching skills demands and supply. This also

means closer collaboration between stakeholders active in skills anticipation. International cooperation should become an important feature for knowledge sharing and enhancing capacities in anticipating change.

## **UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda**

### **Membership**

*Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), Co-Chair*

*United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Co-Chair*

*Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)*

*Department of Public Information (DPI)*

*Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)*

*Economic Commission for Europe (ECE)*

*Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)*

*Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)*

*Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)*

*Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG)*

*Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO)*

*Global Environment Facility (GEF)*

*International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)*

*International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)*

*International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)*

*International Labour Organization (ILO)*

*International Maritime Organization (IMO)*

*International Monetary Fund (IMF)*

*International Organization for Migration (IOM)*

*International Telecommunication Union (ITU)*

*Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)*

*Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS)*

*Office of the Deputy Secretary-General (ODSG)*

*Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR)*

*Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (OHRLLS)*

*Office of the Special Advisor on Africa (OSAA)*

*Peace building Support Office (PBSO)*

*United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)*

*United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)*

*United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)*  
*United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)*  
*United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN Women)*  
*United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)*  
*United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)*  
*United Nations Fund for International Partnerships (UNFIP)*  
*United Nations Global Compact Office*  
*United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*  
*United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT)*  
*United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)*  
*United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR)*  
*United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR)*  
*United Nations Millennium Campaign*  
*United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA)*  
*United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)*  
*United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)*  
*United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)*  
*United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)*  
*United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)*  
*United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination Secretariat (CEB)*  
*United Nations University (UNU)*  
*United Nations Volunteers (UNV)*  
*United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)*  
*Universal Postal Union (UPU)*  
*World Bank*  
*World Food Programme (WFP)*  
*World Health Organization (WHO)*  
*World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)*  
*World Meteorological Organization (WMO)*  
*World Trade Organization (WTO)*