

The world will have to wait until 2084 for universal secondary school education ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Almost a year after a new set of Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 were finalised, the first report tracking global progress towards its goal for education and lifelong learning shows just how far there is still to go to make sure nobody is left behind.

The SDGs replaced the Millennium Development Goals, which reached the end of their 15-year focus in 2015. While the previous goal that focused on education had only one target – to achieve universal primary education – the equivalent SDG has seven, including on expanding secondary and university education.

So UNESCO's 2016 Global Education Monitoring report is the first in a new era, bringing us the inaugural set of evidence to track progress to achieve these new targets.

UNESCO draws on 2014-15 data to show conclusively what we already know: that the world has failed to achieve universal primary education. In fact on current trends, only 70% of children in low income countries will complete primary school in 2030, the year of the SDG deadline. The target to achieve universal primary education, which remains within the broader SDG on education, won't happen until 2042. On the same trajectory, the new target for universal lower secondary education will come about in 2059 and universal upper secondary in 2084.

Less than a year into the new agenda of "leave no-one behind", the data already predicts that we will be half a century late for the first of the 2030 education targets.

Reaching the most marginalised

Leaving no-one behind means working extra hard to create meaningful access to education for those the report calls "disadvantaged subpopulations", distinguished typically by income, gender, disability, ethnicity and location or migration status.

Among the world's three to four-year-olds, the richest children are almost six times more likely to attend an early childhood education programme than the poorest. But while poverty continues to be the largest single root of educational deprivation, the widest disparities are found where multiple issues converge.

In Serbia, for example, the Roma population spends less than half the national average time in school. Nationally, Serbian women outperform men in educational attainment. Yet young Roma women achieve just two-thirds of the educational success of young Roma men.

Demands on national curricula

While efforts continue to get all children into school, the education SDG (SDG4) – ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all – is also targeting what they learn when they get there, and how. Effective teaching practices and the availability of good textbooks are obvious measures of quality, but the new targets place an additional emphasis on changing curricula at the national level.

The curriculum is recognised as the main route to delivering the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development and global citizenship. But a curriculum driven by national policy often contributes to marginalisation through its emphasis on the language, knowledge, history and culture of some groups and not others.

By one measure, around 40% of the global population have no access to education in a language that they understand. Where supportive policy does exist, the report highlights how realities on the ground can make it impossible to implement:

In the Mopti region of Mali, only 1% of primary schools provided bilingual instruction in the appropriate language and by a trained teacher, despite national policy.

Lifelong learning

SDG4 brings technical, vocational and tertiary education to the forefront of the global development agenda, and so they make their debut in the GEM report. Diversity of provision in adult education makes monitoring particularly difficult, so there is a natural weight given to the data around tertiary education.

The good news is that global enrolment in tertiary education doubled from 100m in 2000 to 207m in 2014, but disparity across and within countries still remains huge. For example in the Philippines in 2013, 52% of the richest 25 to 29-year-olds completed at least four years of tertiary education, but only 1% of the poorest did.

At the same time, there is much to be learned from the countries that are experimenting with different models of finance and access. In Chile, the report says that: "About 165,000 students began attending university for free when the new academic year began in March 2016. They represented about half the students from the poorest 50% of Chilean households."

Sense of urgency

The need for a gear change in momentum towards all seven of the targets in SDG4 on education is stressed throughout the report. Our world leaders need to demonstrate their commitment to the 2030 agenda – to leave no-one behind – through political will, new policies, innovation and resources. Irina Bokova, director-general of UNESCO, wrote in the introduction to the report:

If we are serious about SDG4, we must act with a sense of heightened urgency, and with long-term commitment. Failure to do so will not only adversely affect education but will hamper progress towards each and every development goal: poverty reduction, hunger eradication, improved health, gender equality and women's empowerment, sustainable production and consumption, resilient cities, and more equal and inclusive societies.

It feels like I end every reflection on development issues with a sense of urgency, but the new report provides stark evidence that urgency is needed. Education must be at the forefront of every agenda.

What this tells us so far reflects just the same issues as primary and secondary education – that wealth has a massive impact on access to university education.

-reprinted from The Conversation

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