Beyond 2015:
Perspectives for the Future of Education

Sobhi Tawil
Education Research and Foresight
UNESCO

Draft

April 2012
In discussing emerging trends in education and perspectives for the future, we must necessarily consider global development patterns and the possible impact that these may be having on education worldwide.

1. Global development patterns in a changing world

The current context of global development is characterized by widening inequalities observed in most countries resulting in social exclusion and undermining social cohesion¹, growing youth unemployment², rising vulnerable employment³, and where the poor are increasingly found in middle-income countries and in fragile states⁴. Moreover, the increased interdependency of all societies in a context of intensified economic globalisation goes unabated in a context of emerging economies and shifting multi-polar global geopolitics. Furthermore, the greater multiplication and 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 and digital media, explain the emergence of new forms of civic and political socialisation and mobilisation in the context of the knowledge society. Finally, increasing pressures on natural resources and associated climate change, diverse and multifaceted crises and shocks, such as the food, the fuel, financial and debt crises, as well as natural and technological disasters, call for a re-examination of our conceptualisations of progress and dominant models of human development.

2. Redefining the relevance of the international education agenda

In considering the possible impact that global development patterns may be having on education worldwide, it is important to highlight the tension regarding the global relevance of the international education agenda set for 2015. The MDG framework adopted in 2000, only several months after the adoption of the EFA Dakar Framework for Action the same year, not only challenged EFA as the sole reference for educational development at the global level, but also narrowed the international education agenda to Universal Primary Education (UPE) and gender equality (narrowly equated with parity). Indeed, 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. With

¹ Vandemoortele (2009).
² 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 (ILO 2012).
³ According to latest ILO (2012) figures, vulnerable employment is on the rise mainly in sub-Saharan Africa (22 million persons) and in South Asia (12 million persons).
⁴ UNDP (2011).
the narrow education-related goals set within the comprehensive international MDG framework, 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 the education-related MDG goals. If we are to truly consider emerging trends in education worldwide and perspectives for the future, then we must ensure that our vision of the international educational agenda post-2015 acknowledges the diversity of development situations worldwide and the specific challenges they pose for education in different types of context.

3. Trends in international education as we approach 2015

UNESCO has been monitoring progress towards the EFA goals since 2002/03 through the production of the annual Global Monitoring Report (GMR). Additionally, UNESCO also prepared the draft of the main report of the Secretary General of the United Nations for ECOSOC 2011 on the theme of “Implementing the Internationally Agreed Goals and Commitments in Regard to Education” synthesising data largely from the GMR. What do we know about international educational development 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 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.

- With the growing recognition of the challenges of “reaching the unreached”, there is a need to better exploit more disaggregated data (such as household survey data) in order to better identify patterns and causes of non-enrolment and school drop out, in view of the design of more targeted strategies for the most vulnerable children, youth and adults.

- 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.

- 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, and in a continuous process of qualification/requalification.

- Finally, there is a growing awareness of the pressures being placed on public financing of education and a resulting need to seek more efficient use of these limited resources, greater accountability in the investment of public resources for education, and ways in which to supplement them through greater fiscal capacity, new

---

partnerships with non-state actors, as well as through advocacy for increased official development assistance.

In addition, the dynamics of international cooperation have significantly changed in the past decade with a multiplication and diversification of development partners and a proliferation of NGOs, foundations, philanthropists and multilateral aid agencies and funds, as well as emerging donors introducing new patterns of South-South and triangular cooperation.

4. The international education agenda post-2015

As we approach the target date set for EFA and education-related MDGs, global processes are being initiated to review experience thus far and to begin defining the possible shape of the post-2015 development and education agenda(s). There are several strands of discussion within the current context of review of the MDG experience 2000-2015 and thinking about the format and content of the post-2015 international development agenda, and the ways in which these are inter-related.

In terms of process, for instance, 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 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”.

Moreover, 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 inclusion 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, the need to monitor national progress on educational goals through more disaggregated data relates to a second dimension of the discussion on the MDG experience since 2000 which has to do with the focus on outcome indicators. 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 their social distribution. Seeing the international education agenda as unfinished business, a focus on learning, on what is actually learned (knowledge, skills and competencies), 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.

But we must be cautious with the recent emphasis on learning, and the corollary interest in large-scale assessments of learning outcomes, as is being promoted by a range of international development partners. The World Bank Education Strategy 2020, for instance, views “learning gains as a key metric of quality”\textsuperscript{6} overlooking the fact that current large-scale assessments only measure a limited range of cognitive skills. In addition, it may be argued that learning assessments should necessarily be grounded in local contexts and needs, if they are to be relevant for national educational processes. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the fact that standardized assessments of learning and impact assessments are important business industries, with the associated risk of perpetuating the dependency of the most aid-dependent countries on the North for the design of these tools.\textsuperscript{7}

It might be helpful, for instance, in the context of the improvement of the quality of national education systems, to focus less on the outcome indicators at the global level, but more on process indicators 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, as well as their social distribution at various stages of education, and (2) the use of such data in informing strategic interventions to improve the general levels of learning and ensure their more equitable distribution. Such process targets and indicators would allow national education authorities to be more accountable to their partners (families, civil society, other national departments, employers etc…) regarding the results of public investment in education.\textsuperscript{8}

5. Emerging trends for the future of education

The exponential 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 and an elite corps of specialists.

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. With the multiplication of new information and communication technologies and digital media, sources of information and knowledge are becoming more diversified and accessible beyond the confines of formal education systems. Beyond the traditional curriculum-related questions of what to teach (learning content) and how to teach it (teaching/learning methods), the question is increasingly becoming when and where to teach and learn. Recognizing that learning is increasingly happening individually beyond formal educational settings, at different times and locations, the role of teachers will have to evolve from dispensers of information and knowledge to facilitators and enablers of learning.

**Beyond functional literacy**

While progress continues to be made in reducing illiteracy worldwide and reducing 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 760 illiterate youth and adults. 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. It is thus important to consider the various forms of information and media literacy required for full integration into the contemporary knowledge society. Skills associated with the use of new digital media in our everyday lives 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 skill levels.

**Lifelong learning: Beyond 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. Although the lifelong learning paradigm is not new, recent developments are reinvigorating the relevance of life-long education. These developments include the 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.

**A shifting focus from the content of learning to its assessment and validation**

The growing recognition of the importance of learning and relearning taking place outside the formal education and training systems raises the issue of the assessment and validation of

---

12 What Fey refers to as ‘classroom-centric’ learning.
13 See for example UNESCO (1972). Learning to Be.
learning acquired through self-learning, peer-learning, on-the-job, 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 assessment and validation of knowledge and skills, regardless of the pathways through which they were acquired.