

Education 2030:

GCE Members' Briefing on Global and Thematic Indicators Process

As the development of the overall SDG and Education 2030 agendas reaches its conclusion, the spotlight moves squarely to the selection of indicators: the modalities to be adopted to track progress of the agenda.

The UN has established an Interagency Expert Group for SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDG), under the aegis of the UN Statistical Commission, to look into the development of **global indicators** for the SDGs. Earlier, the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) was tasked to look into the development of the **indicators for the EFA process**, under the overall guidance of the EFA Steering Committee, with a focus on the **thematic** aspect of indicator development. There are also possibilities of additional education indicators at the regional and national levels.

This briefing focuses on the development process for the indicators, and follow-up and review of education at the global and thematic levels, but also provides some thoughts on the mechanisms at the regional and national levels.

Some principles on which education indicators should be selected:

The choice of indicators for the SDGs is a major policy decision, with long-term consequences, and as such must not be left to statisticians alone. Furthermore, the indicator framework must be driven by the nature of change that the SDG agenda seeks to achieve, especially for the poor and marginalised. The indicators picked should reflect the spirit of the education goal and targets, and be conducive to measuring policy interventions that can address underlying barriers to progress. They should be understandable by finance ministers, and have the potential to drive decisions to finance the implementation of policies that will contribute to the achievement of the SDG targets. The principles for the selection that we suggest are as follows.

1. **The reduction of the number of indicators must not be at the expense of critical aspects of the education goal and targets.** It is our concern that the parts of the education target that are measured will be the only ones that will be implemented. The broad and holistic education goal should not lose its richness by parts of the framework for measurement selected arbitrarily. The TAG and the IAEG-SDG must not cherry-pick components of Goal 4 and its targets which they deem worthy of measurement. If an aspect of the education target is treasured or valued, it must also have a mechanism for follow up and review. Member states must agree that one indicator per target is not enough to capture the complexities involved.
2. **Indicators must be in line with existing human rights obligations and should not be limited to outcome indicators.** They must be in line with existing human rights obligations and thus include structure, process and outcome indicators. They must evaluate not only the extent of enjoyment of rights by rights holders, but also the extent to which states fulfil their obligations as duty-bearers.

Including structure and process indicators, and not only outcomes, will ensure that states put in place enabling systems (structures) and undertake specific actions (processes) that are critical to ensure that outcomes are achieved. The proposal made by the TAG includes structure indicators in its purview. However, there are frequently gaps between policies and the reality of their implementation. The sheer presence of legislation or policy is not sufficient to ensure improvement of education systems (for example, the presence of a policy or legislation making education free does not guarantee non-levying of fees and other hidden charges in schools); structure indicators must be accompanied by process indicators assessing their implementation.

3. **Provide space for qualitative indicators.** Restricting the indicators picked to only quantitative data carries risks. The statistical principle ‘Campbell’s law’¹ highlights that the more a quantitative social indicator (e.g. a learning achievement test) is used for decision-making, the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.
4. **Incentivise action for the poorest and most marginalised and include disaggregation based on all forms of exclusion as recognised in human rights law – including gender, class, race, caste, disability, age, indigenous/ethnic background and geography.** Both proposals only talk about disaggregation based on sex, location and wealth, despite target 4.5 explicitly mentioning persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations. Broad criteria and datasets, such as the EFA Global Monitoring Report’s WIDE database, are a useful source of information.
5. **Support national and public educational systems.** Indicators picked should recognise and support national education systems and should not undermine member states’ ability to lay down their own curricula. It is particularly critical to ensure that national public education systems are strengthened.
6. **Be based on an understanding of the opportunity costs (both direct and indirect) and risks associated with the regular measurement of the indicators.** It is currently proposed to measure progress against the SDGs annually. It is questionable whether it is realistic to expect annual progress against many of the indicators being proposed, especially outcome indicators.
7. **Indicators must lend themselves to direct citizen participation in the process of measurement of progress, from design, collection of data, and analysis and communication of the results.** The process of indicator development itself should provide space for civil society participation at all levels (global, thematic, regional and national) of the development of indicators and of the tools used to measure them. Apart from statisticians, academia, civil society (especially those working on the specific goals), economists and psychometricians, parents, educators, administrators, and community leaders should have a say.

Do the proposed ‘global priority indicators’ for education do justice to the education agenda?

We feel that the indicators should not be restricted to the only one per target, and disagree with the artificial ceiling of 100-120 global indicators. The current proposal for the IAEG’s ‘priority indicators’ at the global level do not do justice to the agenda. Three indicators exemplify this problem:

1 “The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.” In his 1976 paper, Campbell also wrote that “achievement tests may well be valuable indicators of general school achievement under conditions of normal teaching aimed at general competence. But when test scores become the goal of the teaching process, they both lose their value as indicators of educational status and distort the educational process in undesirable ways.”

- Target 4.1: *“complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes”* has been reduced to the proposed indicator *“minimum proficiency level in (a) reading and (b) mathematics”*. This is problematic as:
 - a) it means that school completion, continued prevalence of fees, extent of equity and quality of education (all parts of the parent indicator) will not be tracked for the coming 15 years;
 - b) it implies that the only ‘relevant and effective learning outcomes’ expected at the end of 12 years of schooling (secondary education) is the ability to read and do mathematics;
 - c) measuring learning outcomes at global or regional levels risks standardisation of school curricula, especially if national education administrations try to adapt a curriculum to the requirements of what is internationally assessed. Quality education values individual and cultural diversity and creativity, and seeks to develop learners’ personalities, talents and abilities to live full and satisfying lives in their societies. What is valued differs from culture to culture and is derived from history, values and traditions of a particular country. There is no reason to think that what constitutes ‘relevant learning’ is identical for all children across the world, irrespective of cultural, linguistic and national differences. A single global metric of learning will, at best, ignore these differences providing a skewed and incomplete picture of education in a particular country. At worst, it will contribute to homogenising educational systems, and place children from marginalised communities at risk of being labelled failures if they cannot meet benchmarks which bear little or no relation to their personal or social contexts;
 - d) it focuses on the level of the individual learner without paying sufficient attention to the learning system that supports the learner or teacher;
 - e) it shifts attention to short-term fixes designed to help a country quickly climb rankings between testing cycles, despite research showing that enduring changes in pedagogic practice take decades. This critique has been levied against existing international learning achievement tests that are administered at intervals of three (PISA), four (TIMSS) or five (PIRLS) years. The SDGs are to be assessed annually;
 - f) this constitutes a dangerous experiment. No existing data source on learning outcomes cover even half of the world’s countries. The proposal is to define minimum proficiency levels with reference to a new, universal learning scale and calibrate different assessments according to a common metric. The proposal of calibration of existing regional assessments to an untested global metric appears dangerous in view of what has been described above.
- Target 4.7 commits to *“ensure that 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, however, gets reduced to *“fixed level of knowledge across a selection of topics in environmental science and geoscience.”* In so doing, it reduces education for sustainable development and ignores all the areas covered under the target.
- The over-arching target 17.17 seeks to *“Encourage and promote effective public, public private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resources strategies of partnerships.”* This, however, gets narrowed down to only *“Amount of US\$ committed to public-private partnerships”*. In so doing, it ignores civil society as partners in development and reduces the concept of partnership to transfer of funds from the public to the private sector. There is no evidence to show that PPPs in the

education sector reliably deliver better quality services, and considerable evidence that reliance on the private sector to deliver essential services has a negative impact on equity.

GCE's alternative recommendations

GCE is proposing an alternative set of global and thematic education indicators, drawing on the GCE movement's consensus position, additional submissions made by GCE members, and other technical inputs. These are available [here](#), but should have been attached to the Members' Mail accompanying this briefing. Some of the indicators proposed by us as thematic indicators may be of use in the development of regional or national indicators.

Follow up and review of the SDG agenda

Effective, equitable implementation of the SDGs will only happen when measures for robust, participatory monitoring, follow-up and review are put in place to ensure accountability. The focus on equity in the new framework will only be achieved if the most marginalized are involved in the monitoring and conscious and proactive steps are taken to solicit their views in national, regional, thematic and global review processes. The new post-2015 monitoring and accountability mechanisms should include:

- **Accountability to citizens.** The principal accountability should be to nation states. However, in terms of the global architecture, accountability should not only be national, but universal, with established architecture and grounded in the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, and not minimise donor commitments. Accountability mechanisms must be democratic, transparent, participatory, human rights-based, and timely.
- **Democratic governance and recognition of civil society.** Civil society is a critical interlocutor at all levels (local, national, global etc.) and must have space to participate in decision-making forums. Rights of freedom of expression, association and assembly must be respected and a clear commitment made to reversing criminalisation of civil society.
- **Meaningful tracking of progress at all levels.** In line with the existence of separate indicators for tracking progress at national, regional, global and thematic levels, mechanisms for monitoring progress should exist at all levels. UNESCO should ensure a strong thematic monitoring mechanism in the education sector.
- **Coherence with existing mechanisms.** Accountability mechanisms should draw on experiences of existing mechanisms for review of human rights obligations, like the Universal Periodic Review. In the education sector, pre-existing mechanisms like the Global Education Monitoring Report, the Education 2030 Steering Committee, and the Collective Consultation of NGOs (CCNGO) must be strengthened. There must also be a biannual Global Education Meeting with representation of education ministers.
- **Rigour.** Monitoring should not be limited to voluntary reviews, but include independent, rigorous reviews of States' policy efforts and achievements, and lead to concrete action to ensure appropriate remedies and corrective action.
- **Comprehensiveness.** Mechanisms should encompass reviews of resource allocations and international cooperation commitments, and include means to ensure accountability of the private sector in the country of operation and, where relevant, the global community.
- **Clear definitions.** Consistent understanding and measurement requires a process to develop internationally accepted operational definitions of the key concepts that are part of global and thematic indicators.

- **Capacity-building.** There must be sufficient statistical and administrative capacities of education departments to ensure understanding of the frameworks, strong data collection, and effective use of data for decision-making and planning.

A UN-established body, the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), has been mandated to *“conduct regular reviews, starting in 2016, on the follow-up and review of sustainable development commitments and objectives, including those related to the means of implementation, within the context of the post-2015 agenda”* and is expected to constitute the apex body at the global level. The HLPF’s capacities will need to be enhanced to take on the new. There must be a channel for civil society to submit independent reports to the HLPF reviews to lend credibility to the process.

Regional reviews should include elements of peer review, and offer spaces to share experiences, good practice, and lessons learned throughout the implementation of the post-2015 agenda. Capacities of the regional statistical commissions will need to be enhanced to take on this role.

Existing thematic monitoring mechanisms created for tracking progress of the EFA agenda should be strengthened. A thematic strand should be part of national and regional reviews, and clear formal spaces for participation of civil society organisations active on individual goals should be created.

For the processes of follow-up and review of the framework to be truly successful, however, national level mechanisms are critical. It is essential that national reviews are regular, periodic and provide for citizen participation, especially from marginalised communities and for children and youth.