
Guest editorial: International cooperation in education at the new stage

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The current issue features “**International Cooperation in Education at the New Stage**” and includes six articles. The meaning of international cooperation in education has changed recently in important ways. This is in response to enhanced challenges of educational development globally and in developing countries, particularly coupled with fundamental shifts in the contexts in which educational development is pursued.

The change in the scope and the context of educational development

This year 2023 marks the mid-term point of *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) implementation, in which experiences of progresses, slippages, cases of success and failure will be examined. Before the adoption of SDGs in 2015, the global education agenda centred around Education for All (EFA). The primary focus was made on ensuring that all children complete primary education of good quality, along with five other goals (UNESCO, 2000). Simultaneously, the Millennium Development Goals, the development framework preceding to SDGs emphasized the same (Goal 2).

The focus and the scope of educational development, as included as the fourth goal of SDGs (SDG4), were notably reinforced from those of EFA and MDGs. The overarching goal statement of SDG4 is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” and its Target 4.1 goes, to “ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes” (UNESCO, 2015). SDG4 covers the entire levels and types of education, from early childhood care and education to higher education and lifelong-learning, both at formal and non-formal settings. It aims at free education to be provided up to the secondary education which inflates the existing financing gap to a huge extent. Lewin, in his article: “It is time to fix the low financing trap: public spending on education revisited”, reveals, when low- and lower middle-income countries are grouped according to their level of public education spending, that individual country’s education spending largely remained unchanged at the same and insufficient level since the 1990s, pointing the existence of a “low financing trap” and “only the highest band countries are likely to be able to finance the ambitions of SDG 4 with domestic revenue.”

Another noteworthy aspect of SDG4 is that the learning outcomes are discussed not only in the cognitive domain, but also in the non-cognitive domain. Target 4.7 encapsulates this characteristic and provides the orientation of educational development by referring to Education for Sustainable Development, Global Citizenship Education, as well as culture, peace, human rights and other universal values. The paper by Benavot & Williams: “Can we transform global education without transforming how we monitor progress? Rethinking how



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Target 4.7 is infused into education systems” points out that fewer than half of all countries are able to report on the global indicator for Target 4.7 and propose to create a new platform “to track progress of these transformative features of global education policy.”

From the viewpoint of developing countries, especially low-income countries, these enhanced objectives add up to unbearable burdens. Many of these countries failed to achieve universal primary education prior to embarking on the broader scope of free education. What is most worrisome is the fact that the majority of children at school-going age, even including those who have attended basic cycle of education, do not have the minimum literacy and numeracy. Facing such alarming learning poverty, the importance of foundational skills is being strongly pronounced (World Bank, 2020). Fredriksen argues, in his article “Promise Not Kept: Universal Primary Education for all Children in Sub-Saharan Africa,” that the governments of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) must take the post-pandemic opportunity to “build back better” by resetting policy objectives to “develop basic education and training systems that are more *inclusive, equitable and responsive to national development needs* by better serving the large population groups,” while addressing the major education financing gap, building institutions for leadership, accountability and innovation, and using aid to maximize its investment impact.

The challenge of educational development is further complicated by major influences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many countries developed online and information and communication technology (ICT)-based learning and teaching contents and devices in the face of lasting school closure, and took hygiene and sanitation measures carefully when reopening school. However, based on the studies conducted in Asia and SSA, two articles describe gloomy realities. Mousumi’s article, “Access and Equity: What do we know about government primary school students’ remote learning experience during school closures in Bangladesh?”, found that schools were closed for as long as 18 months in Bangladesh, many students had difficulty in accessing digital media due to lack of mobile phones or internet access and in getting necessary support from teachers and parents. She argued that students with disadvantaged background were disproportionately affected. Malenya & Ohba’s article, “Equity Issues in the Provision of Online Learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Kenya”, similarly found that the government’s approach to providing equitable and inclusive online learning rather aggravated gaps in educational opportunities, leaving students living in remote areas and urban informal settlements, girls and learners from low-socioeconomic households further behind. Moreover, some girls lost protective space of the school environment, resulting in the increased incidence of early pregnancy.

It is estimated that “learning poverty” has worsened in low- and middle-income countries during the pandemic, from 57% in 1999 to 70% in 2022 (World Bank *et al.*, 2022).

The need of a new approach to ICE

The relationship between developing and developed countries has also entered a new stage. Urgency to tackle global issues as comprehensively captured by the SDGs’ framework requires every country to take broad-based responses. This is a major turnaround from the pre-SDGs’ phase, when development challenges were mainly those of developing countries with technical and financial support provided by developed countries and international organizations. Today, all countries are to work collaboratively by exchanging knowledge and lessons from experiences. Issues addressed by SDGs, such as climate change, health, education, economic activities, for example, are viewed as closely related and require stronger intersectoral interactions. The need of strengthened collaboration among a broader range of players is evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic. In education, conventional major players, such as UNESCO, World Bank and Global Partnership for Education, as well as other international and bilateral organizations, have constituted mechanisms to work more closely [1], and efforts are

underway to mobilize increased resources to be made available to educational development. Whether these mechanisms are suitable for accelerating the progress toward achieving SDGs is yet to be critically examined.

Srivastava & Matovich illustrate in their paper, “The G20 and the Think 20 as New Global Education Policy Actors? Discursive analysis of roles and policy ideas”, that G20 is emerging as a powerful mechanism for agenda setting in the global politics scene. Its Engagement Groups, formulated by respective stakeholder groups such as business, civil society organizations, think tanks, women and youth, provide recommendations to the G20 leaders, on key issues, including education. Think 20 is one of the Engagement Groups that provides policy-relevant ideas drawing on their expert knowledge. The effectiveness of G20 and T20 in influencing the policy making, policy shaping and knowledge mobilization needs to be further investigated.

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Note

1. Global Education Cooperation Mechanism (<https://www.sdg4education2030.org/who-we-are>) has been instituted, but its effectiveness in coordination and advancing implementation of SDG4 is yet to be examined.

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