

# Will there be education goals after 2015?

## Education's fragile position on the global agenda

Nicholas Burnett

The six Education for All (EFA) goals and the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), two of which concern education, all expire in 2015. Though there are still three years to go, we now know that they will not be met on time without redoubled efforts, despite unprecedented progress particularly in terms of primary school enrolments and completion and in terms of gender parity, the two issues that are in both sets of goals. We also know that there has been much less progress on other goals, especially youth and adult literacy, early childhood care and education, and education quality. Indeed, many now argue that the quality issue, specifically that children in developing countries are not learning what their curricula call for, has taken on crisis proportions – of symbolic importance, for example, is the World Bank's titling its new education strategy as 'Learning for All'. In addition, while aid for education has gone up since the goals were set in 2000, it has done so more or less proportionately to aid in general, and there has been essentially no increase in the share of aid devoted to either education or basic education. Finally, many donor countries are now cutting their aid for education budgets in the wake of the global financial crisis and their domestic austerity programmes.

Given this, there are two interesting groupings emerging in the international education community: one is focused on 2015, the

other on beyond 2015. The first group argues that the most important objective right now is achieving the current goals – and that this should not be interrupted by discussion about the future. This is the official position of several major bilateral aid donors, for example. Other groups, meanwhile, have started to lobby extensively for the inclusion of certain specific topics in any future goals. Particularly prominent here are attempts to focus on children's learning rather than just enrolment and completion, as exemplified particularly by:

- The effort pioneered by the Brookings Institution to achieve a Global Compact on Learning; renewed lobbying in favour of early childhood care and education by the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Development.
- Those promoting the importance of skills, especially skills for employment, heard, for example, at the Third International Conference on Technical and Vocational Education in Shanghai in May.
- Those promoting education for the disabled, a particular case of a broader lobbying effort on behalf of the disabled by many groups, such as Mobility International USA.
- Those continuing to call for an increase in aid for education, like former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and the Global Campaign for Education (such calls actually straddle both pre- and post-2015 discussions).

These lobbying efforts and related discussions are extremely interesting and valuable. But they are largely confined to the education community, based on an implicit assumption that there is a global consensus in favour of continued education goals, and that the issue is just to decide what these goals should be. In fact, education faces a more existential crisis at the level of the international community, for two reasons. First, there is considerable evidence that education is not a current priority for the global community. Second, and related to the first, there is no well-organised process leading towards any future goals. There are four broad reasons for these concerns:

1. **Education (and human development more generally) has slipped on the global agenda.** Investing in people is no longer considered as overriding as it was. The human development paradigm that characterised the late 1990s and was reflected in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) goals of 1996 (and that formed the basis for the MDGs) is no longer dominant. Instead, there is intense attention and focus in the broad international community on jobs and growth on the one hand, and on



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sustainable development on the other, especially climate change. Such foci, whether correct or not, clearly also require significant attention to education (education is essential to acquire employment skills; education is a prerequisite for climate change mitigation). Yet this attention is simply not there. This is not especially a matter of declining interest by rich countries, though there is some of that. Rather, other issues receive more global attention by both developing and high-income countries. Neither the recent G8 meeting in Chicago nor the recent G20 meeting in Mexico paid attention to education; yet it is only a few years since education was an important G8 topic, notably at the St Petersburg summit in 2006.

2. **There is no strong global education movement and no strong UN agency for education.** A concerted lobbying effort by donors and by civil society organisations from the South and the North led up to the 2000 Dakar that established the EFA goals. Such an effort has yet to emerge today, only a few years prior to 2015. There are certainly promising developments, such as the possibility that the Global Partnership for Education (formerly known as the Fast-Track Initiative) may turn into a more inclusive partnership, though necessarily one still focused on basic education, and the considerable momentum achieved by the Global Compact on Learning. At the same time, UNESCO, which played a major leadership role with regard to the current EFA goals, has yet to organise a global process leading to future goals, and is very much struggling with day-to-day concerns caused by the loss of the US financial contribution that represented over a fifth of its budget. Still unclear is what possible role might be played by the UN Secretary-General's recently announced Initiative on Education; that it is needed at all shows the relative lack of leadership coming from elsewhere. It is not too late for progress in terms of generating a movement and providing global leadership, but it is starting to become very late – positions for post-2015 goals will likely be staked out at the latest by 2014.
3. **There is a dangerous perception outside the education community that the education goals are the closest to success of all the MDGs,** as I observed in last year's Commonwealth Education Partnerships. This is based on the huge enrolment gains already made without regard to either: (a) the recent slowing of enrolment rates, which mean that the approximately 10 per cent of the world's children who do not go to primary school may continue not to be enrolled; and (b) the lack of learning among those children who do go to school, now increasingly recognised as meaning that any definition of success is inadequate if it simply follows a strict interpretation of the MDGs and of the primary education EFA goal and equates it with primary school attendance and completion. In fact, as noted above, there is increasing concern that the children are in school but are not learning what their curricula require, with growing evidence of widespread performance well below expectations in such basic areas as reading and simple numeracy.
4. **There is much less chance of linking education with international resource flows today than there was in 2000, except to low-income countries.** A key aspect of the 2000 goals was to encourage increased flows for basic education in low-income countries, where the poorest people in

the world lived. Today, however, the bulk of the world's poor live in middle-income countries, which are not likely recipients of external financial support. This is a good development in that any new goals will have to be more democratically adopted by sovereign countries and not just reflect the donor priorities that tended to dominate in 2000. But it is much less good in that any possible delinking of goals and financial flows tends to diffuse focus – nothing sharpens the mind, after all, than the question of new resources and who should benefit from them. The situation is further complicated now by declining aid resources – among bilateral donors, only the UK's Department for International Development (DfID) and Australia's AusAid continue to increase aid for education in both absolute terms and as a share of their aid programmes. Others, such as the Netherlands, are cutting education, in the wake of broader cuts to aid, and often by proportionately more than education's share. While the new international resources discussed in this volume last year are beginning to emerge, they are nonetheless still relatively small compared to aid flows for education, and they are also losing momentum due to the broader decline in education's overall standing on the international agenda.

This apparently gloomy picture is not irreversible. There is – just – still time for education to be a major feature of any new international goals. But leadership is needed – and currently lacking. The partial delinking of possible future goals from international resource flows and from aid means that there is a real opportunity for developing country governments to take the lead in making education a higher global objective and, within that, on focusing on what may be their agreed overarching priorities for education. This is especially so for Commonwealth countries, which already have so much in common but represent also an important mixture of high-income, emerging and low-income economies. This, in turn, requires some ministers to become global –not just national – champions, and requires also that civil society organisations in developing countries insist that their governments recognise and promote these priorities and then hold them accountable.

More generally, the international education community should pay as much attention to its declining standing among global priorities and try to reverse it, rather than just assuming that there will be a future for education.

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