SDG 4

Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Access to quality education, the new paradigm

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Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda reflects the aspirations and demands of parents, educators and civil society organizations to meet the educational and learning needs of the poor, discriminated and exploited populations in every country in the world. Its formulation goes far beyond the scope of the MDGs, which focused on achieving universal primary education in MDG 2 and on closing the gender gaps in education as the measure of gender equality in MDG 3. In adding the equitable, inclusive and quality dimensions to the goal on education, SDG 4 reflects what was already agreed by governments in the Education for All (EFA) strategy of the Jomtien Summit (1990)[1] and most recently in the Incheon Declaration (2015).[2]

The new goal seeks to ensure "inclusive, equitable, free and quality primary and secondary education" (Target 4.1) and to "eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations" (Target 4.5). As such it recognizes the disparities in access to inclusive, just and quality education that persist in all countries.

The provision of skills that qualify people for decent work and quality jobs, access to equal and effective higher education and the adoption of the "lifelong learning" approach are all vital conditions for sustainability. Societies that aim to be prosperous and fair need to include adult education and identify new literacies that enable people to succeed in everyday life. They also need to value and adopt educational initiatives carried out through so-called "non-formal" education, including community learning, environmental learning and non-traditional curricula designed to serve those unreached by formal educational institutions.[3]

Since universal access to quality primary education has not been achieved, it is imperative to accelerate global political, institutional and financial action to enable children and young people in every community to access educational institutions, and thereby benefit from science and technology. Current times demand creative and sustained responses: the prosperity of a sector of the world population with high cultural capital is not in line with the situation of many groups whose rights to an inclusive and quality education have been infringed.

For this reason, SDG 4 must be contextualized politically, supporting all countries to accelerate measures to make progress towards educational equity and justice. The provision of equitable and quality education cannot wait or slow down. It has to respond to the continuous transformations of the so-called knowl-

1 Cf. UNESCO (1990).

2 Cf. UNESCO et al. (2015).

3 Cf. http://infed.org/mobi/what-is-non-formal-education/

edge society. What today may be a weak or failed response to a demand for educational justice, in a short time could be classified as a serious omission and an overall failure of social and economic justice.

For the same reason, the effective expansion of access to public and free secondary education and to vocational training, as mandated by Targets 4.1, 4.4 and 4.5, has to include the learning of new skills required for people and their communities to reach prosperity, well-being, a "good life" and to enjoy global cultural goods. A change of direction is required for educational policies to build capacities and develop quality services that encourage inclusive societies in order to promote freedom and human rights in a comprehensive way.

SDG 4 and its targets require new paradigms for the organization and management of educational systems and policies. For example, Target 4.2 commits governments to "ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education". It will be important that this is complemented by primary and community health programmes – including through the provision of infrastructure and professional resources.

To implement this, Target 4.a specifies the upgrading of "education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent inclusive and effective learning environments for all." These targets need to be adapted to different age groups, cultures and territories.

To enable young people to acquire the relevant skills for decent jobs and entrepreneurship, as mandated in Target 4.4, and to enable them to integrate successfully into civic life and culturally diverse societies, as specified in Target 4.7, teacher training programmes are essential. These not only need to be substantially increased, including through international cooperation (Target 4.c) but also need to include a variety of different and culturally sensitive methods in order to enable teachers to reach the broadest number of people.

In addition, educational services and programmes need to be created that strengthen the capacity of

non-formal and community education. The UNESCO document *Rethinking Education. Towards a global common good?* [4] should generate movements and discussions that will lead to a more relevant paradigm for a comprehensive approach to education guided by the 2030 Agenda.

Comprehensive targets, narrow indicators

Despite this comprehensive vision, detailed in a set of 10 targets, the indicators for SDG 4 are totally inadequate to measure its achievement. In March 2016, the Global Campaign for Education, in a joint statement with 214 civil society organizations, academics and educational professionals, voiced the concern that the indicators for education threaten the commitment of Goal 4 for every child to complete 12 years of free primary and secondary education.

Teopista Birungi Mayanja, Deputy Director of Uganda Education Services and former Education International board member, encouraged civil society to unite and challenge 'teaching to the test' and international assessments promoted by some testing companies and private providers.

"None of the indicators selected for Goal 4 captures either the importance of completion of primary and secondary education, which obliges countries to attend to the population of out-of-school children, nor that these 12 years must be free. The omission of these two critical components significantly alters the nature of Target 4.1 and lowers the agenda's overall ambition." [5]

Looking forward:
realizing the vision, not its indicators

Just and sustainable societies will only be possible where all people have effective cultural capital and the ability to participate in the common cultural life. This makes it necessary to extend the scope of educational processes and to define specific targets

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4   Cf. UNESCO (2015).

5   Cf. www.campaignforeducation.org/docs/statements/
    Education_Civil_Society_IAEG_SDGs_FINAL_EN.pdf.

"The incredible efforts of governments, UN bodies, and civil society activists – working collectively – resulted in a Sustainable Development Goal for education which we all believed would give every child, adolescent, youth and adult a serious chance to realize their right to free, inclusive, quality education. The unanimous adoption of the SDGs was a moment we celebrated, but today, just six months later, this vision is being threatened. Our demands are not controversial – we simply want an indicator which reflects the goal and targets to which the world has already agreed." [6]

Camilla Crosco, President,
Global Campaign for Education, 4 March, 2016

6   Cf. http://bit.ly/29jYXpd

for schools at primary, secondary and tertiary levels within the framework of the SDGs, and according to a concept of inclusive, participatory, and intercultural schooling. This should be done through local and national participatory consultation processes involving residents of every community, and their political representatives and authorities.

Civil society organizations working on education in countries in both the global North and the global South have developed criteria to promote critical thinking and local advocacy on the part of educators, authorities, policy-makers and teachers' and students' movements.

It will be necessary to demand accountability of educational institutions and also to promote professional and volunteer activism of civil society organizations that practice an "expanded education" through new communication technologies, social networking and local forms of education, in which the various communities convey their knowledge. From this same perspective, it is important to note that adult education, according to the "lifelong learning" approach recognized in the SDGs, is essential to ensure that "no one is left behind." People and groups that fail to get a

quality education must not be labeled disposable and irremediably excluded, being unable to handle the new cognitive codes and lacking citizenship skills.

A key challenge is to ensure that access to public education really means receiving a quality education, as stated in SDG 4. The goal cannot be deemed to be achieved by the expansion of enrollment in primary and secondary education if, at the end of their years of schooling, children and youth fail to understand what they read, do not know how to develop basic mathematical operations, are illiterate in matters of citizenship and participation; or during their school days have suffered discrimination and the destruction of their lifestyles and cultural languages because of monocultural, gendered and or racist educational systems.

The quality of education should also be assessed according to the ability of the education systems to provide shelter for children and youth in high risk situations, such as natural disasters, war and armed conflict, neighbourhood violence or gendered, racial and religious aggressions.

Further, it is important to assess the quality of education systems by evaluating their ability to retain students in schools, confronting risk factors of dropout, such as the need to work in order to contribute to family income, the responsibility of girls and young women to assume the tasks of care and domestic work, teenage pregnancies, large distances between the place of residence and the location of the school, cultural and linguistic differences, authoritarianism and a culture of punishment that still remains the rule in some societies and communities. In this regard it is important to recognize the escalating crisis of education and work in urban youth cultures that are stalked by gang violence, organized crime and the lure of the narco-industry that provides income and an illusion of prestige among the youth.

Inclusion and quality are vital aspects of educational justice that must be advanced – as mandated by SDG 4. For this a key political requirement is that local and national societies appropriate the meaning and content of this goal in a way that associates urgency, cultural relevance, participation and public deliber-

ation and a deep commitment to the health and sustainability of the planet as a common home in which "learning" is synonymous with human development.

Stop funding for-profit private schools

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has recommended, in its observations released on 9 June 2016,[1] that the UK Government stop investing in low-fee private schools in developing countries. Low-fee, private and informal schools run by for-profit business enterprises are multiplying rapidly in developing countries. The UNCRC noted that "rapid increase in the number of such schools may contribute to sub-standard education, less investment in free and quality public schools, and deepened inequalities in the recipient countries, leaving behind children who cannot afford even low-fee schools."[2]

The UK Department for International Development (DfID), through its development finance institution CDC, has invested US$ 21 million in the low-fee, for-profit private school chain Bridge International Academies (BIA), since December 2013. BIA,

which also receives millions of dollars from the World Bank, the UK-based Pearson Corporation (the largest book publisher in the world), and billionaires Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, has recently been in the global press for its heavy-handed tactics to stop a respected academic researcher accessing information on its business and operational practices in Uganda. The researcher, who was working on behalf of the world's largest professional organization, Education International, was arrested on false allegations, but was released after two days of questioning and all charges were dropped.[3]

BIA presents itself as "a chain of nursery and primary schools delivering high-quality education for just US$ 5 a month (on average)."[4] Referring to the huge number of families living in extreme poverty, it claims that "prior to Bridge International Academies, no one had put together a viable business model that demonstrated that educating the world's largest

market was possible." In order to ensure "this massive market opportunity" they explain that "we would need to achieve a scale never before seen in education, and at a speed that makes most people dizzy."

The Global Campaign for Education, a civil society movement active in 80 countries, notes that this type of for-profit private schools favoured by the World Bank, philanthropy and big donors can have a huge, negative impact on children's right to a quality education. GCE Vice-President Rasheda K. Choudhury, who is also the director of the Campaign for Popular Education in Bangladesh, warned that "education is becoming more and more of a commodity being sold in the market rather than a public good. This worrying sign is becoming more prominent when we see the ever-increasing quality divide in education."[5]

1 Cf. GCE (2016) and www.ohchr.org/ EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews. aspx?NewsID=20078&LangID=E.

2 Cf. UN Doc. CRC/C/GBR/CO/5 (3 June 2016), para. 16.

3 Cf. GCE (2016).

4 Cf. www.bridgeinternationalacademies. com/

5 Cf. http://campaignforeducation.org/ en/news/global/view/680-education- for-global-citizenship-achieving- the-sustainable-development-goals- together.

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Targets for SDG 4

4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes

4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education

4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university

4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship

4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations

4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy

4.7 By 2030, 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

4.a Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all

4.b By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries

4.c By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States