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CHAPTER 3

DEVELOPMENT AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION 2019

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Chapter 3
Quality education and lifelong learning for all – A focus on people

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The ambition of SDG 4

When the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 2015, they were welcomed by member states, civil society and other stakeholders. The 2030 Agenda aims to provide a universal reference framework for sustainable development that can unite efforts to improve lives and save the planet.

Following on from the 15-year Millennium Development Agenda, the SDGs not only brought new topics to the agenda (such as climate change, economic inequality, innovation, sustainable consumption, peace and justice), but were noteworthy for their universal character, in that they assigned responsibilities to developed industrial countries as well as to developing countries. There was also an increased emphasis on the interconnected character of the goals, and the notion that success in any one area could unlock the potential of the others.

This is very much the case with education. The whole 2030 Agenda clearly reflects this vision of the cross-cutting importance of an appropriate educational response. Education is explicitly formulated as a stand-alone goal – Sustainable Development Goal 4 ("Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all"), but it also seen as crucial for the achievement of many other goals. Education and lifelong learning are the golden thread that runs through the implementation of all 17 SDGs.

The expectations of education are very high: It is a prerequisite for poverty reduction, as well as gainful employment and decent jobs. It is also crucial for sustainable growth, building social cohesion, achieving prosperity, and promoting human rights and equality. The ambitions are clearly expressed in the targets of SDG 4 (UN, 2015), while numerous education-related targets and indicators are also contained within other SDGs.

Access to information is a key factor for success here. To paraphrase Paulo Freire, when people can neither read the words nor the world, they lack possibilities not only to change their own lives or the situation on the national level, but also to have information and knowledge about the issues for which they could fight on the global level.

It is true that, at the level of governments, there is a strong focus on the need to collect reliable data and information as the "key to decision-making" in support of the implementation of the Agenda. This covers collecting data and information from existing reporting mechanisms, developing new methodologies for the collection of data, and "efforts to strengthen statistical capacities in developing countries."

When it comes to access to information by "common people" – for whom the whole agenda is created – there is a broad reference to "access to information" (in SDG 16), but also many references to information for practical use, such as information "on food reserves," "health-care services, including for family planning," or "information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature." This is complemented by talk of bridging the digital divide, and providing "access to information and communications technology" and "universal and affordable access to the internet."

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Access to information is also essential for achieving education for all. Potential learners need to know about the opportunities available, they need to interact with information as part of the learning process, and both they and government need information to assess the success of policy initiatives in the areas. This essay explores some of the key issues in the design and implementation of SDG 4, and how access to information contributes to success.

2. People, not politicians: helping everyone to learn

A first key question comes from the fact that the 2030 Agenda as a whole – and of course SDG 4 – is centred on people. As a result, people should be at the core of its implementation, and benefit from the transformative change that it promises, rather than simply being subject to the decisions of others. If information is power, access to information is crucial if people are to be empowered, and so the SDGs achieved.

Yet there is a risk that more effort goes into building capacity for governments, notably to monitor progress (which is indeed important, but should not be the only focus), than into supporting access to information for everyone. Given that those who have access to the relevant information have the power, it is crucial that access to information is considered as a human or civic right, and the right of all those people whom the Agenda is addressing, in order to empower them to take the role of agents of change.

When talking about ensuring the rights of individuals, it is important to remember the motto of the 2030 Agenda: "No one left behind." In other words, it should be for all countries and groups of people. No one should be excluded. But this will remain wishful thinking if we continue with "business as usual." When it comes to education and information, we should note the conditions faced by at least two groups.

Firstly, people in less developed countries face multiple forms of marginalisation and deprivation. In countries struggling with budget weaknesses or a lack of capacity to develop policies, a lack of access to information can stand in the way of progress. Even if there are measures on a national or regional level, it is not clear whether relevant information will be accessible for all. Extensive experience has shown that proper guidance is useful, in terms of sharing information about education possibilities, offers and provisions that might be suitable, especially in non-formal education. This can be the case for everyone, from people in huge urban areas living in slum conditions to those in remote rural areas who are completely cut off from any source of relevant information. They are at risk of being unaware of the possibilities available to them, even if these exist, reducing the effectiveness of even the best-conceived policies.

The same principle applies in the context of the agenda-setting stages of the policy cycle. Here, there is a risk of a one-way communication where "beneficiaries" – especially in less developed countries – are passive receivers of information that has been selected, shaped, "packed," interpreted and distributed at power centres that exclude participation of "common people." The narratives of the SDGs and means of implementation are created mostly by the global players, and the "beneficiaries" are in the best case informed about it, and seldom have even the opportunity to give feedback or to take active part in the transformation processes.

Secondly, adults and older people are also at risk of being left behind in the context of education efforts. In the SDGs, adults only feature as a target group in Target 4.6 – related to achieving literacy and numeracy, with very vague success indicators ("a substantial proportion of adults..."). The reference to "lifelong learning" may not help either. While the concept was once welcomed for its efforts to promote continuous education that places the learner at the centre, it has not fulfilled its promise, and indeed has left the door open to a focus of resources on younger learners at the expense of older ones. Moreover, putting the person in focus and insisting on individuals, it ended up giving adults full personal responsibility (most notably the financial one) for their learning and has diminished the responsibility of the state. The emphasis on non-formal education and on learning generally (instead of education) has weakened educational structures and institutional support and put educational outcomes high on the agenda (at the same time neglecting educational structures and processes). Thus, lifelong learning remained an empty frame in which adult education disappeared. Marginalization of this sector gained a powerful instrument, an excuse supported by the high-level policy approach. (Orlović and Popović, 2018, p. 7)

Adults also belong to the group that, compared to youth, have less access to information about education possibilities and options.

This can be for geographical, economic or political reasons, or because there is a social stigma, shame or previous bad education experiences that prevent them from reaching out for information, for chances, opportunities and prospects.

The increased weight given to digital access to information can cut them further adrift – much research shows that adults and older people can be reluctant or less successful in using ICTs. An exclusive focus on digital resources deprives them of those materials to which they are accustomed, such as the physical ones held in libraries, and minimises their chances of obtaining meaningful, relevant and adequate advice about types of information, areas of knowledge and learning methods that they may get within the educational structures.

3. Digital technologies – a necessary tool, but not a silver bullet

If there is one dominant feature of the new Agenda, it is the faith in ICT and digitalisation as a "silver bullet." The high level of trust in the power of technology is based on several successful projects where mobile phones or computers have been used to achieve the goals with the certain target group.

It cannot be denied that digital technologies play an especially central role in the implementation of Education 2030 and SDG 4. But it is wrong to understand information only in a digital context. Not all information is digital and not all knowledge needs to be, or should be, based on digital information. Focusing on digital information and neglecting other types leads to the loss of wider areas and sources of information and knowledge.

It should also be remembered that ready access to the internet and digital tools is still not a reality for a big part of the world, or of the human population. The spread of the internet has come with a "digital divide" between rich and poor. Claiming that it is universal, the 2030 Agenda risks seeing the world through the lenses of the reality of more developed countries. Chakravorti warns: "Since the global digital players are based in the Digital North, much of the hand-wringing at headquarters is still over problems of the Digital North. It is high time we recognize that the Digital South is poised to forge its own path. Its attitudes and engagement with technology are different." (2018) This definitely has an impact on how technologies are used in education and how information is received and treated in different parts of the world.

It is also key not to take a means for a goal. While ICT could be a great supporter of educational endeavours, it is only a tool; the "good, old questions" of education remain: What is the content? Who is creating it and for whom? What kind of information should be delivered, thought, and how? Who is doing the monitoring and evaluation and how? Are all users really capable of taking on the whole educational process, without guidance, support or feedback?

Some interactive platforms offer a limited answer to these questions, but it remains far from the case that the internet can replace important parts of the education system. It is also increasingly clear that there are risks associated with extensive use of the internet and social media among younger people. Digital technologies and social media will indeed revolutionise our world and the way we live and work, but not in a uniquely positive way.

In adult education, there are many target groups who need more than the skills to use digital technology in order to become independent learners. Especially with marginalised groups with low literacy, motivation is of crucial importance. An encouraging teacher or facilitator, a supportive group and environment, and empowering methods and atmosphere are more important for this kind of target group, and play a crucial role in reducing the risk of dropout.

Moreover, effective learning requires leaving the comfort zone sometimes and experiencing cognitive dissonances or discomfort when our stereotypes or "blind spots" are questioned. Reading books that have stood the test of time, having a reflective teacher that inspires critical thoughts, or having the experience of direct contact with visual arts are actions whose impact shouldn't be underestimated in the process of education, even if they cannot be captured in targets or indicators.

The complex issues of human motivation, reluctance, fear, shame and needs can hardly be solved by quick technological fixes. The question is, obviously, not whether the digital technology should be used, but how. A mixed approach is needed, but it seems to be overlooked or neglected in SDG 4.

4. Education and meaningful interaction with information

A focus on "providing" education can also overlook the fact that knowledge, especially in adult education, is created through two-way communication. The one-way approach, which risks being the case with the more restrictive current understanding of "access to information," assumes fixed, stable and reliable sources of information on one side, and passive receivers on the other.

This is a very traditional, even obsolete understanding of education and teaching, and increasingly inadequate, especially for adult education. To be active agents in delivering development, people need to be able to be co-creators of knowledge based on information.

Linked to the previous point, a key condition for active citizenship is critical thinking. Can people be reflective about their own learning process and how they will deal with the contradictions, difficulties and challenges in that

process? Do they have the broader competences (including ethical values) that could stand against "fake news" and misuse of digital media?

There is a need for much stronger efforts to develop **critical** access to information as well as media literacy, enabling citizens to question the sources of information, to evaluate them and to recognise various kinds of propaganda, manipulation and fraud. Indeed, critical thinking and critical reading of information are all the more essential as the role of ICTs grows, yet cannot themselves be successfully covered only by using ICT.

Many of the current problems the world is experiencing are not due to the lack of pure digital know-how, but the lack of related skills and attitudes. These require much more than the physical ability to get hold of a book or connect to the internet. Non-virtual spaces and interaction with written resources are important, not only for the techniques of reading and writing that are crucial for the literacy skills, but also for recognising and understanding three crucial aspects of information: context, content and meaning.

Example: "Ang Guro kong Pulis," a mobile library campaign in Manila

Although the Philippines has one of the highest literacy rates among Southeast Asian countries, there is still a gap in literacy and a need to achieve inclusivity in education. The gaps are especially apparent at the community level (children, out-of-school youth, etc.), where the lack of classrooms and teachers is an important issue.

In order to meet some of these challenges, the "Ang Guro kong Pulis" educational project has been launched under the leadership of the Manila Police District. The project aims to give free basic education to street children. As a part of the project, one of the police vehicles has been filled with various books and turned to a mobile library, and several police officers have been visiting the streets of Roxas Boulevard in Manila.

Starting in October 2018, they offered children the books to read, with the idea of thus keeping them away from drugs and weapons. After the initial successes, the parents of children were also included into the programme; they would come along, and police officers with a background in education, who were tasked with teaching and bringing books, started teaching parents too. The mobile library now has 11 stops or stations, with ambitions of increasing the number.

The police provide meals for the participants, while several colleges and universities have been helping by conducting seminars on drugs, crime and basic first aid as well as supporting the programme by donating old books and writing materials. The books are used to teach basic education by giving lessons in basic reading and writing in English and Filipino, maths and civic education. This is a long-term solution that tries to support street children through education, but with the potential to include communities too.

5. Beyond metrics, a necessary focus on outcomes and resources

There are implications from the heavy focus on measurement[1], which can lead to the neglect both of whole areas of education and of key factors that underpin success.

Certainly, it is a positive that there has been a drive to choose indicators that are "scientifically robust and evidence-based" (UNSD, 2015). These help make data collection more reliable and transparent, and monitoring easier. Nonetheless, this approach risks creating a kind of "mantra," where "what we choose to measure will dictate where states' activities are directed" (Long, 2015). The indicators risk driving the agenda, "putting measurability first and broader political concerns that cannot easily be simplified second." (Freistein, 2017). Such broad concerns can include less easily quantified goals such as democracy (Smith, 2018).

In the case of education, the Education 2030 agenda pretends to be value-free, but its targets and indicators have an undeniable social and organising function. They carry a particular educational concept and are based on a particular value system, which shapes their social dimensions, "their omnipresence and power, particularly over those who are too powerless to resist them" (Freistein, 2017).

Both the UN 2030 Agenda and the Education 2030 Agenda have a strong focus on educational outputs rather than less easily measured processes and outcomes, with one consequence being the neglect of further education areas beyond vocational education and training (VET) and skills. This leads to an under-appreciation of the importance of knowledge creation in important areas of human life, such as that which is delivered by libraries, as well as of things like art, creativity and critical thinking.

In parallel, there is of course a need for funding. It is estimated that $3 trillion will be needed annually in order to achieve an inclusive, equitable and quality education for all (SDG 4). The Global Education Monitoring Report estimated that low- and lower-middle-income countries would face an annual financing gap of US$39 billion in 2015-2030 (UNESCO, 2015). At the same time, investment in education is decreasing worldwide, both in the form of domestic spending and official development aid.

We need to be realistic about the possibilities to draw on private funding and domestic resource mobilisation, given both the need to ensure a continued focus on public interest goals in educational policy, and the irony that it is often the minimal taxes paid by private multinationals that lead to governments having insufficient money to spend in the first place.

6. The role of libraries

As already indicated a number of times, libraries have a potentially valuable role to play in delivering SDG 4, and in particular in addressing some of the challenges set out above. Their work is not only about the "good, old" habit of reading books.

There are recent studies by Vesna Crnogorac that point out the important role libraries have in democratisation of society and in the transformation of closed societies to democracy. "More than ever in the long history of libraries, there is a responsibility to create the conditions for free access to sources of knowledge and information, regardless of the differences (ethnic, political, religious, ethical). The library – by nature a democratic institution – serves society by serving the individual citizen who finds a place where he/she can achieve freedom of expression and free access to information. We are in a historic moment as regards respect for democratic values, and the public library needs to redefine its role from traditional to contemporary [...] The public library as an ''access point'' for citizens in the area of freedom of information helps to achieve transparency and implicitly could allow for the exercise of that right of free access to information of public importance." (Crnogorac, 2016)

Access to information is closely connected to knowledge, democracy and protection of human rights, and public libraries are places where these values meet. Furthermore, a library is a place of cooperation of various partners and stakeholders, a centre of the local community and its activities, and a guidance centre for inquiry, research and learning.

Libraries welcome those at risk of being left behind, promote the development of critical information skills and other behaviours that allow everyone to make best use of information for education (and that may not be so easily measured), and provide a space for people of all ages to come and learn. At a time when there is a need to mobilise all resources to deliver development, it is necessary to make full use of libraries.

Yet this role of libraries is not sufficiently addressed in the UN 2030 Agenda notably SDG 4. Bearing in mind all of the difficulties the implementation of the Education agenda is facing, we can hardly afford to give up such a powerful resource and important ally in our efforts.

7. Conclusion

The 2030 Agenda puts an accent on data and information, especially in the context of monitoring the implementation of the Agenda, with SDG 4 of course included in the efforts. The UNESCO Institute of Statistics[2] is indeed drawing on this data to warn of gaps in implementation, and is clearly inviting "countries, donors, international organizations and engaged citizens – to make the case for education at the next High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development" since even "the most basic data show that we are far from the goal of ensuring that every child is in school and learning by 2030."

But it is obvious that an approach to SDG 4 focused only on standards and schools misses out on non-formal education and lifelong learning. Crucially, it also neglects the role of access to information as a vehicle for transparency and a gateway to adult education.

Furthermore, meaningful access to information provides the basis for knowledge and should be seen as a precondition for the development of critical thinking skills and democratic citizenship, whereby data and raw information would be critically chosen, connected, reflected and assessed. The role of libraries is also important, since ICT and the internet should be seen as a useful tool, but not a magic solution.

Access to information is an important precondition for achieving the targets of SDG 4. Without a full recognition of this in the discourse about the 2030 Agenda, accompanied by greater investment in education and lifelong learning, huge groups of people will be left behind by 2030.

1. There are comparably few discussions about how to support implementation, and hardly any lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals. "The 'post- 2015' euphoria does not take into account the fact that the majority of the issues which held back success in the MDGs and Education for All (EFA) movement have not been resolved, or have even worsened. The strong contemporary conviction that the lack of clear, measurable indicators was one of the main problems does not have a basis in research evidence or in contextual analysis..." (Popović, 2015). Criticising the effects of high-stakes testing on students' motivation and learning, Amrein and Berliner remind us that "we should remember the wisdom in the farmer's comment that weighing a pig every day won't ever make the pig any fatter. Eventually, you have to feed the pig" (2003). We risk focusing only on a limited number of successes, and ignore the waste that occurs when serious, systemic and structural problems are left untackled because they do not show up in the indicators.
2. UIS urges: "We need data to track progress over time. We need data to pinpoint the barriers to education access and quality. We need data that are disaggregated to ensure that no child is left behind. We need data that support national priorities. We need data that are internationally-comparable. We need data that demonstrate what works, so that resources can be channelled for maximum impact" (Montoya, 2019).

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