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ONE INDICATOR TO RULE THEM ALL: HOW SDG 4.1.1 DOMINATES THE CONVERSATION AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE MOST MARGINALIZED

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Abstract:

Three years in it is clear that the broad aims of the SDGs remain a work in progress. The ambitious project, with its vision to inspire a wide range of educational goals and ensure that all children attain a quality education, is often narrowed down to student achievement in mathematics and reading. To some this is not surprising; among many in the comparative and international education community, critics were concerned that SDG 4.1 would dominate the agenda. The prioritization of achievement and the movement away from the earlier focus on access makes one wonder if some children will be forgotten. This discussion essay details how the SDGs have been narrowed and how that impacts the most marginalized. Although choices prioritizing time and resources to some targets over others are pragmatic in nature, that does not mean they are without tradeoffs. In a world where education has become the major stratifier and growth in education has been concentrated in the middle and upper classes, those remaining out of school are at a greater disadvantage. The second half of this essay will review empirical work that describes the disadvantaged characteristics of the increasingly entrenched, less educated class; greater health risks, decreased access to knowledge and technology, and increased fear of the cultural other. Research plays an important role in ensuring the wide ranging goals of the SDGs are not forgotten by highlighting this more marginalized group and maintaining a focus on the broader social and personal goals of education.

Keywords: SDGs, Marginalized, Student Achievement, Equity, Stratification

Subject Index Terms: Global Goals, Educational Quality, Educational Access, Negative Consequences, Social Stratification

Three years into the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) agenda it is clear that the development of the goal for education (SDG 4) remains a work in progress. In 2015, SDG 4 was taken up by the world with an ambitious agenda. It is far more holistic than its predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), applying to all countries, with coverage beyond basic education to lifelong learning, and including access and participation, as well as completion and quality provision. The overarching goal of SDG 4 is to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’. However, instead of proceeding with this broad, aspirational agenda, the transition from the MDGs to the SDGs has often been simplified as a movement from access to quality. This reduction has largely warped original intentions of the SDGs (King, 2017).

This shift toward quality filled what many saw as a massive hole in the MDG agenda. A view supported by reports that students were in school but not learning. The 2013/14 Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report highlighted a global learning crisis where 130 million primary school age children have completed at least four years of primary education but were lacking basics in mathematics and reading (UNESCO, 2014). This was supported by the 2016 International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity

(Education Commission, 2016) report, which emphasized that three in four children who are not learning are in school, and the World Bank's World Development Report 2018 focused on the learning crisis (World Bank, 2018).

Diminishing quality to a limited measure of student outcomes was not the intention of critics who were looking to make quality more central. In Fehling et al.'s (2013) review of limitations of the MDGs, primary concerns with quality were focused around teachers, infrastructure, completion rates, and class sizes, not student scores on achievement tests. Still reflecting on global education goals since Jomtien in 1990, it is clear that discourse on student outcomes have largely replaced student needs (King, 2017). The movement toward student outcomes as a form of test scores reflect a larger Global Testing Culture where student test scores are the indicator of teacher, school, and system quality (Smith, 2016). In its first report covering the SDGs, the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report recognized the reductionist approach to monitoring education quality and voiced its concern that "good quality education should not be equated with, or reduced to, learning outcomes" (UNESCO, 2016, p. 188).

This essay details how the SDGs have been reduced to a narrow view of quality, understood as student test scores, and how this minimalist approach impacts the most marginalized. It proceeds by examining how the SDGs have been reduced, before asking who is being forgotten and what does it mean for their future prospects.

Narrowing of the SDG for education

The SDGs were the result of a long, collaborative process that combined efforts from the MDG summit in 2010 with the Rio+20 Conference in 2012 (Sachs-Israel, 2016). The creation of the SDGs was member state led with guidance by the United Nations (UN) (Sachs-Israel, 2016). In addition to consultations in over 60 countries, the online My World Survey asked the world community what issues they wanted to see prioritize over the next 15 years; education topped the list (Sachs-Israel, 2016).

The development of the SDG for education (SDG 4) has been described as "arguably the most inclusive process of consultation in the history of the United Nations" (Naidoo, 2016), with four years of intense conversations with multiple stakeholders, including governments and civil society (Benavot & Naidoo, 2018). UNESCO took the lead, with the aim of developing a single, universally applicable agenda on education that addressed the unfinished business of the EFA and MDG goals (Sachs-Israel, 2016). Regional thematic consultations, meetings with ministry officials and civil society, EFA reviews from 131 countries, and the 2014 Global EFA Meeting in Muscat, Oman, led up the 2015 World Education Forum (WEF) in Incheon, South Korea (Sachs-Israel, 2016). The final WEF declaration, adopted by 1600 participants from over 180 countries (Benavot & Naidoo, 2018), largely set out the SDG 4 targets and reaffirmed a single human rights based, education agenda (Sachs-Israel, 2016).

However, while the creation of SDG 4 and its 10 targets was largely inclusive, the development of indicators was, and continues to be, a highly technical process that leaves out the voices of non-statisticians (McGrath & Nolan, 2016). Global indicators for all SDG goals were developed by the Inter-Agency Expert Group on SDG Indicators, which includes 27 national statistical offices and a UN Chair (King, 2017). The technical process and the need for quantifiable, comparative indicators, resulted in a set of indicators that did not match the ambition of the targets (Johnston, 2016).

The early decision on which indicators would be considered global and which would be relegated to thematic had significant ramifications on the more comprehensive aims of SDG 4. While global indicators are universally applied and expected to be reported on by all countries, thematic indicators are considered voluntary. Therefore, the majority of resources in indicator creation, monitoring, reporting, and state action will focus on the global indicators and thematic indicators are not taken into account in the UN's annual SDGs Report (King, 2017).

Among the education targets, SDG 4.1 has come to dominate discourse. The full target reads 'by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes'. The associated global indicator (SDG 4.1.1), however, is limited to the 'percentage of children and young people: (a) in grades 2/3; (b) at the end of primary; (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics by sex'. Out of the original five descriptors, only 'quality' makes it into the global indicator, 'free', 'equitable', 'relevant', and 'effective' are relegated to voluntary thematic indicators, if included at all (King, 2017).

Not surprisingly, given its position as a global indicator, the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) has prioritized SDG 4.1.1. Even when compared to other global indicators for education, SDG 4.1.1 seems to rule them all. In the world of the SDGs, UIS is identified as the source for cross-national, comparative data on SDG 4 and is expected to establish the methodology for monitoring indicators and help strengthen country data collection efforts (King, 2017). Their focus on student assessment in mathematics and reading is obvious in their efforts to create the Catalogue of Learning Assessments (UIS, 2015), which feeds into their database on learning assessments, as well as the Learning Assessment Capacity Index, which evaluates countries' resources to determine their 'readiness' for measuring learning outcomes (UIS, 2016).

The Global Alliance to Monitor Learning (GAML) also has a central role to play in reducing quality to student outcomes. GAML was established by UIS and focuses mainly on parts of SDG 4 that are associated with learning outcomes – targets 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.6, and 4.7 (UNESCO & UIS, 2016). However, it is clear from GAML activity that SDG 4.1 is the focus. For example, GAML's progress report to the fourth Technical Cooperation Group in January 2018 (GAML, 2018) briefly mentions updates on other indicators before going more in depth on the comparability of national assessments for mathematics and reading. This emphasis was reinforced in a recent conversation with a country representative, where it was relayed that SDG 4.1 largely dictates the agenda at GAML meetings with targets almost appearing to be ordered according to priority, from SDG 4.1 to SDG 4.7. Due in large part to GAML's effort and attention to SDG 4.1, global indicator 4.1.1 was moved from a tier 3 to a tier 2 indicator (Benveniste & Montoya, 2016). Each indicator has been classified into one of three tiers based on established methodology and data coverage. As of November 2018 SDG 4.1.1 is the only indicator to have advanced up a tier (UNESCO, 2018a), suggesting it has been prioritized in time and resources.

In 2017, UIS further solidified the privileged position of learning outcomes over access by creating a single composite indicator. Following a recommendation by the Education Commission (2016), the new, flagship indicator was designed to provide a simple, easy to understand number of children not learning that could be used as an advocacy tool to rally support for SDG 4 (Crumpton & Montoya, 2017). While the indicator takes out of school children into account in its calculation, the publicly facing top line number – more likely to be

taken up by the media and in policy discussions – effectively hides those not attending. The first roll out of the flagship indicator found that 617 million children and adolescents worldwide are not meeting minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics. In the corresponding factsheet, out of school children are included, but only as a percentage of those not meeting minimum levels (UIS, 2017). By elevating this indicator and phrasing the world's out of school population as 15% of those who do not have sufficient skills in mathematics and reading, we are downplaying the millions of children not accessing education.

Large numbers still without access

Between 2000 and 2016, there has been an important reduction in the number of primary and secondary school age children out of school. However, in 2016 263 million were still out of school, including over 63 million missing at the primary level where the enrollment rate has been stagnant since 2008 (UIS, 2018). This final 9% of the primary school age population represent the most marginalized. This is often those from poorer families, that live in rural areas, have been displaced, or have a disability. Disadvantages often intersect, for example an estimated one in five of the world's poorest have a disability (Miles & Singal, 2010).

Those out of school are not likely to make it into primary education without an increased financial commitment by countries and the international community. Between 2010 and 2014, the amount of aid going to basic education dropped from \$USD 5.5 billion to \$USD 4.7 billion. Additionally, the share of aid to basic education as part of total education aid declined during this time. In 2016, \$USD 6 billion was spent on aid to basic education, a 27.7% increase from 2014. Still, aid does not go to countries struggling to reach universal access. The share of basic education aid allocated to low income countries was 22% in 2016, the lowest share in the years where data are available. In sub-Saharan Africa, the relative share of aid to basic education continues to decrease. Although nearly one in two of the world's out of school children call this region home, in 2016 the region only collected one out of every four dollars in aid (UNESCO, 2018b). To get this group into school demands more. The last children out of school represent the highest per capita cost. In 2015, the GEM Report (then EFA GMR) suggested that costs are 20% higher for getting the 90 to 95th percent of students in school and 50% higher for the 95th to 100th percent (UNESCO, 2015).

The future for individuals with less education

The prioritization of quality, seen in SDG 4.1.1 and measured in student test scores, is more damaging today as education has assumed the position as primary social stratifier (Baker, 2011). As the effect of education increases in society, those with less are left behind. Occupational pathways not linked to formal education credentials – such as personal ties, apprenticeships and patronage – are on the decline, replaced by the seemingly more merit based course through education. The labor market structure is becoming closely tied to academic degrees as the importance of parental SES on their children's adult status diminishes (Hout, 1988; Pfeffer & Hertel, 2015). This is, in part, due to the increasingly normative notion that education represents expertise and that the educational experience aids in personal development, including instilling life skills such as problem solving, communication, and time management (Baker, 2011). In essence, as life chances are dictated more and more by educational attainment, there are limited opportunities for social mobility for those without education.

Although, on average, the world has seen a sharp rise in the amount of education completed, growth in attainment has been asymmetrical. The last 150 years have been

described as the education revolution with mass schooling expanding from primary to secondary and even higher education (Meyer et al., 1992; Schofer & Meyer, 2005). Yet, Mann and colleagues (2017) illustrate how uneven expansion can be. Amongst those that completed the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the percentage of students whose parents completed a post-secondary degree increased from approximately 35% in 2000 to nearly 80% in 2009. Change, however, was concentrated in the middle levels of education. Those whose parents completed less than lower secondary education decreased nominally from about 10% to 7%.

In a more rigid educationally stratified society we risk the establishment of an entrenched, less educated underclass. Research points to the importance of education increasing in more educated societies, especially when comparing the most and least educated (Hayward et al., 2015). Consequences of an increasing education effect for those with less education include not just a reduced likelihood of finding employment, but reduced access to technology, decreased likelihood of identifying as a global citizen, and worse health outcomes (Mann et al., 2017; Smith & Baker, 2018; Smith et al., 2017). In comparing results from 2000 and 2009, the effect of parental education on access to the internet at home increased over time. The positive relationship between internet access and both completing secondary and post-secondary education increased over the decade. Combined with the diminishing difference between less than secondary and lower secondary it is clear that the gap in accessing technology between the more and less educated is increasing (Mann et al., 2017).

Education is also more important for sense of self and individual health. For instance, across the 46 countries that completed the 2005 World Values Survey, education plays a significant role in individual's affinity to identify as a global citizen. This effect increased in more socially integrated societies, indicating that as movement across borders continues to increase globally the less educated are less likely to recognize commonalities with their new neighbors (Smith et al., 2017). Finally, the general positive effect of education on health is well established. Nonetheless, recent work suggests that in countries with higher levels of education, the benefits of greater education on health increases (Smith & Baker, 2018).

Conclusion

This brief essay highlights how the broad ambitious agenda of the SDGs have been reduced to a narrow vision of quality as student test scores, with negative consequences for the most marginalized. Although choices prioritizing time and resources to some targets over others are pragmatic in nature that does not mean they are without tradeoffs. The elevated position of SDG 4.1.1 draws attention away from those that need it most and the role of education as the primary stratifier in society suggests that without an immediate shift in attention and resources we are on our way to entrenching a less educated underclass. Highlighting school-based assessments as the new composite student learning indicator leaves little to no recognition of the greater than 263 million children still out of school. Factors impacting the shift from access to a limited view of quality include the prioritization of global indicators over thematic indicators, technical nature of indicator creation, and seeming need for a single top line indicator for advocacy and funding purposes.

Within a world where education has become the major stratifier and growth in education has been concentrated in the middle and upper classes, those remaining out of school are at a greater disadvantage. As Baker (2014) points out, in the schooled society "all must compete in the highly cognitized environment of formal education" (p. 13). To improve the life chances of the most marginalized, access for all needs to be repositioned at the heart of SDG

4. Research plays an important role in ensuring the wide ranging goals of the SDGs are not forgotten by highlighting barriers to access for this less educated group and maintaining a focus on broader social and personal goals of education.

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