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Sustainable social progress begins with education: current perspectives on the Asia region

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Education has been recognized as a fundamental human right. The transformative power of education is widely acknowledged as a means for people to realize their capabilities and move towards social progress. In the year 2000, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) prioritized the completion of a primary school cycle. Based on the success of the MDGs, in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reiterated that education is not only an end in itself but also a means to achieving the 2030 global agenda. The premise is that societal sustainable development and social progress is only possible through comprehensive cross-sector efforts that begin with education.

The education chapter in the IPSP report highlights how educational opportunities and achievement lead to social progress.¹ The authors examine multiple perspectives and goals of education (economic, civic, humanistic, and equity promotion) including educational governance, institutions, facilitators and barriers, curriculum and pedagogy. Key recommendations include educational governance reforms that are sensitive to the institutional, political, cultural, and social contexts; facilitate transnational processes of communication on evidence-based research connected to societal progress; and professionalization of educators and educational institutions. Since educational institutions have an important role to play in social progress, access to quality education from early childhood years must be assured to all, without any discrimination. The education content and pedagogy is the main shaper of the schooling experiences that have implications for lifelong learning, value formation, a sense of peace and justice, constructing citizenship and civic responsibilities, well-being and preparing for productive adult roles for societal development. Pedagogy has the potential to uphold rights, address complex issues related to equity, peace and justice, and encourage critical thought processes in a culturally sensitive framework. Therefore, curricular reform is required to balance core subjects with new 21st century skills required for the future generation.

In this article I briefly examine some of the recommendations with a special focus on the Asian region along with the recent shifts in the strategic perspectives of the local governments with regard to achieving inclusive quality education for all.

The Asia region: diverse demographic patterns

Countries in Asia have seen widening income disparities. This geographically diverse region is home to close to 60% of the world's population with socio-economic, cultural, and political realities that reflect on the current state of education in many of the Asian countries. The latest United Nations SDG report on the Asia-Pacific,² reports that implementation across the SDGs needs to be scaled up substantially, namely on reducing inequalities and on promoting peaceful societies, access to justice and strong institutions. The region has made good progress on eradicating poverty (Goal 1) and promoting good health and well-being (Goal 3), and is on target to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 (Goal 4), provided the existing momentum continues. Efforts to widen the access to pre-primary education and strengthen the quality of teacher training have been particularly successful. However, regional variations persist.

South-East Asia has already achieved the level of quality education (SDG 4) required by 2030 and North and Central Asia are also progressing apace towards this goal. East and the North-East Asia sub-region show that the largest SDG 4 progress gaps exist in reducing gender-related educational inequalities. Progress is slower in South and South-West Asia which is below the regional average in gender equality and access to quality education.³ South Asia also lags behind on many human development indicators. Many countries in South Asia are fraught with low literacy rates and life expectancy. There are an estimated 11.3 million primary and 20.6 million lower secondary out-of-school (OOS) children in South Asia.⁴

The situation is further aggravated in many low- and middle income countries (LMICs) in Asia with inequalities in access to basic education, low resource allocation in support of quality education, and socio-cultural factors that fail to fulfill the education rights of children, especially girls. There exists an urgent need to address the persisting challenges of OOS children and learning along with early childhood development and gender equity through primary and secondary education and alternative learning pathways. Education policies that promote equity and support disadvantaged students in achieving better academic outcomes need more effective implementation.

Key educational issues in the Asia region

The nature of educational concerns varies across the countries depending upon specific priorities and needs in each country. The reasons are compelling, ranging from economic to geographical to socio-cultural factors such as poverty, lack of resources, social exclusion, inequity, urban-rural divide, lack of adequate education programs, gender disparities, and repressive cultural practices like child marriage that make the picture look bleaker, especially for the OOS children in the region. Enrollment in formal schooling system does not guarantee that learning needs are met. Recent achievement tests show an alarming percent of students who have been in the school for three or more years who still have not mastered the basic skills of reading and writing.

Some of the most pressing issues concern the following:

- provision and access to inclusive quality education services with particular reference to the needs of the marginalized and disadvantaged groups;
- active involvement of the community in the ownership of schools and training institutions;
- greater attention to the role of teachers as agents for educational progress and social change;
- effective use of information and communication technologies in schools;
- updating of the curriculum and pedagogy;
- paying greater attention to the needs of youth by providing quality skill training, relevant and diverse secondary education, since this is a key factor for social and economic development; and
- expansion of higher education with improved vocational and educational training facilities.

As reiterated in the IPSP report, the education curriculum is a key driver for the development of lifelong perspectives among students on issues related to peace, justice, and citizenship among others. A recent UNESCO MGIEP report (2017) on *Rethinking Schooling for the 21st Century* reviews the extent to which concepts and competencies associated with SDG (Goal 4.7) are mainstreamed in education policies and curricula in 22 countries across Asia.⁵ Against the backdrop of the political, economic and cultural contexts in Asia, this report provides the state of education for peace, sustainable development and global citizenship across schools. Key findings suggest:

- (i) a greater focus on the instrumental role of education in developing national identity and human resources with concepts associated with gender equality, peace, and global citizenship primarily absent from education policy as well as curricular;
- (ii) a greater focus on skills and competencies that tend to ensure a flow of human resources for enhancing economic competitiveness such as critical thinking, problem-solving, empathy;
- (iii) a need to promote a participatory model of curriculum development; and
- (iv) a need to rethink the fundamental priorities of education policy and reassess international emphasis on monitoring and measuring educational outcomes.

Emerging positive trends

The advocacy with the Education for All (EFA), MDGs, and now the SDGs has led to a proliferation of legislation, programs and projects resulting in an increase in resource allocation to education in many Asian countries. Despite these initiatives universal primary education continues to remain elusive even in countries with high participation rates. The gender gap in literacy persists in favor of males. However, despite these challenges, all countries in the Asia region are investing in sustainable human development, justice and equity in all respects with a greater focus on investing in education quality, effectiveness and relevance of education and schooling. The reform is receiving attention from governments in the region.

There is a shift in focus from schooling to learning. The need is recognized that all learning needs must be accompanied

by alternative, tailor-made, non-formal learning methods. This has resulted in some countries (Indonesia, India, the Philippines) experimenting with systems in which participants of non-formal programs are allowed to cross laterally into the formal system. And as the non-formal sector becomes more formalized, conversely the formal sector is becoming more informal or less rigid by adopting mother tongues in the first few years or incorporating an eight week pre-school package at the start of the primary cycle as in the Philippines.⁶

The drive towards universal primary education in Asia has tended to favor quantity or expanded access. However, in the long run this has not translated into more educated students. As evident from many countries in South Asia, there is low participation and attendance when school is perceived to be of little relevance or quality. Paradoxically, improving quality also enhances quantity; providing trained and motivated teachers, adequate learning materials, and most of all curricular content that meets the needs and aspirations of the local communities is the best way to guarantee expanded and sustained school attendance.⁷

Across the Asia region, governments are aware that education reforms face multiple challenges that require long-term vision, political will and ability to innovate, and the financial resources to support the implementation of effective education policies. Policy makers need to have easy access to evidence on the impact of policies and programs designed to improve education outcomes. The Global Monitoring Report 2016 includes studies assessing the impact of 216 programs implemented across 52 low-and middle-income countries (LMICs).⁸ It moves beyond examining whether a program works or not by examining multiple factors that influence the effectiveness of education programs, and by getting into the details of the program operations it offers many valuable lessons for all those who are working in the education sector across the world.

From the perspective of the Asia region, which has the huge challenge of making education a real pathway for social progress for its entire people, we need critical insights on the effectiveness of structured pedagogic programs, additional instructional time, remedial education and community engagement. This review of programs provides evidence on the effects of a range of education interventions in LMICs.⁹ Analyses of the effectiveness of these interventions in improving children's enrolment, attendance, completion and learning outcomes in primary and secondary school reveal interesting results. The results provide important findings to inform future programs. These results demonstrate that programs can improve school participation and learning outcomes in LMICs. Programs typically improve either school participation or learning outcomes, but not both. The exceptions are community-based monitoring, school-feeding and multi-component interventions. The evidence suggests these interventions have improved both school participation and learning outcomes in some contexts, although more evidence is needed to confirm this finding. There is strong and consistent evidence that cash transfer programs have relatively large positive effects on school participation outcomes, while structured pedagogy programs have the largest and most consistent positive effects on learning outcomes. Children face multiple barriers to school participation and learning. Educational programs may be more effective if the design is informed by an analysis of the main barriers to improved outcomes in a particular context, including the capacity of other parts of the school system closely linked to an intervention. Such analysis will allow new programs to target the main constraints and therefore achieve better outcomes. We need more studies of programs that target teachers, studies that use more rigorous designs to assess the effects of intervention, target different sub-group or populations, as well as studies of process, implementation and costs.

The pursuit of sustainable development and environmental conservation policies, objectives and targets requires the public

Doing his homework. Photo taken in Kolkata, India © Ashok Nath Dey, submitted to the IAS photo contest 2014.



to be sufficiently sensitized about the multiple dimensions of environment and development. A major concern for education across Asia is environment education. Its pursuit in schools is a relatively new phenomenon. In the context of global warming and climate change, Asia's late industrial growth presents a major challenge to education. Example of Bhutan is inspiring wherein working in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the Environment Education Program has developed an extensive network of Nature Clubs. In addition to being a focal point for environmental awareness among school and college students, the Nature Clubs engage local communities in a number of practical conservation activities, including studying and promoting solutions to local environmental issues.¹⁰

As the national governments work on strategies for meeting the SDG 4 and targets by 2030, the need is there for increased use of evidence when deciding on education investments. To ensure inclusive and equitable access to quality education for all, we need to work both on generating and using more and better evidence.

Concluding comments

Moving towards the goal of sustainability requires fundamental changes in human attitudes and behavior. Progress in this direction is thus critically dependent on education and public awareness. The key to sustainable, self-reliant development is education – education that reaches out to all members of society through new modalities and new technologies in order to provide genuine lifelong learning opportunities for all. Therefore for social progress, all countries need to reshape education so as to promote economic, civic, humanistic, and equity promotion goals conducive to a culture of sustainability. Promoting sustainable development, whose close interrelationship with democracy and peace is increasingly recognized, is one of the key challenges of our time; and education in all its forms is vital to addressing it successfully.

Reorienting education to sustainability requires recognizing that traditional compartments and categories can no longer remain in isolation from each other and that we must work increasingly at the interface of disciplines in order to address the complex

problems of today's world. This is true both within education, where interdisciplinarity is slowly and with difficulty gaining ground, and between the spheres of education, work and leisure as lifelong learning emerges as a key concept for planning and developing democratic educational systems. It is also true as concerns the most important boundary of all: that separating those included in education systems from those who are excluded from them.

In the Asia region, in spite of the considerable progress that has been made, there are still enormous barriers to reorientation of formal education to sustainability, barriers that cannot be addressed by the efforts of individual teachers or even schools, no matter how committed they might be. Effectively overcoming such barriers requires commitment by society as a whole to sustainable development and social progress. Such commitment would involve facilitating democratic processes that include all of society's stakeholders to work collaboratively and in partnership, including industry, business, grassroots organizations and members of the public, to develop policies and processes which integrate social, economic, cultural, and political goals. A socially progressive society will be one in which all aspects of civic and personal life are compatible with sustainable development and all government departments work together to advance such a society towards progress. The role of formal education in building society is to help students to determine what is best to conserve in their cultural, economic and natural heritage and to nurture values and strategies for attaining sustainability in their local communities while contributing at the same time to national and global goals.

Another major area of structural reform is the development of new ways to assess the processes and outcomes of learning. Such reform may be inspired by what people want from their educational system, as well as what society needs. Learning needs to be seen as a life-wide process that empowers people to live useful and productive lives. The reorientation of education along these lines – and in anticipation to the extent possible of future needs – is fundamental for sustainable development, including its ultimate objective not only of human survival but especially of human well-being and happiness. Similarly, there also needs to be a revamping of

the methods of credentialing students. The various ways in which students are judged (testing, report cards, evaluations) and the basis for awarding diplomas at all levels need to reflect the reformulation of outcomes of learning towards sustainability. The competency based assessment in education in Bhutan demonstrates how if education is to be of any relevance and importance to learners of this century, which demands a workforce with diverse skills and competencies, conventional assessment practices must be replaced by competency-based assessment, so that learners are prepared to face globalized opportunities and challenges.¹¹

Given that scarce resources are a political reality, better data are essential to target those resources towards the most severe problems and towards context-relevant interventions that have been shown to be effective. There is pressing need for better data on specific barriers that confront marginalized children. These include more rapid and flexible assessment of the needs of children caught up in fast-moving conflicts and greater disaggregation of data to see how gender discrimination shapes school attendance and performance. We need close scrutiny of the ways in which child labor and non-attendance reinforce each other and how the language children use at home can become the language they use at school. Finally, we need a concerted and global effort to ensure comparable and standardized definition of disability, based on social rather than medical models, to end the "invisibility" of children with disability in the data and classroom.¹² Local governments, schools, and communities have a crucial role to play in identifying and providing coordinated support to OOSC and those at high risk of dropping out. Measures to ensure inclusion and address the specific barriers to children's schooling through the reforms of education systems can only succeed when matched by democratic measures to address wider disadvantage and to smooth out inequities linked to income poverty, gender, ethnicity, language, geographic location and disability.

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Notes

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