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From MDGs to SDGs: Where does education fit?

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Abstract

This paper is a revised and updated version of a presentation made to the Centre for Research in International Education conference held in January 2016 at Auckland Institute of Studies, in Auckland, New Zealand. The stimulating comments and suggestions from those attending the conference are gratefully acknowledged. Any remaining defects are solely the responsibility of the author. The method is a qualitative analysis of the place of education in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and comparing this with the place education has been accorded in the early work relating to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the post 2015 era. There is also a brief consideration of the resource costs of the indicators and measurements approach taken in both the MDGs and SDGs with the case of Education used as an example of one of the goals in both cases.

Keywords: Education, development, Millennium Development Goals, Sustainable Development Goals, indicators and measurement.

Introduction

In this paper education is viewed as not only being of major importance to development, but critical to the achievement of the MDGs with goal number 2, out of the eight goals in total, directly related to achieving full universal primary education as a key educational component, and goal number 3 including gender equality in education as a second key component, aimed to be achieved. 2015 was the target time for achieving the goals. Previous efforts to ensure education for all had come through the Jomtien declaration, with a target date of 2001 for achieving full universal primary education. The extension to 2015 inherent in the MDG targets, reveals that Jomtien had proved to be more aspirational than realistic. A previous article in the

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predecessor to this journal (Dunuan, Jackson & Ali, 2012) talked of how, even by 2012, it was unlikely that the MDGs as they related to education were then going to be achieved. By 2015 this was seen to have been proven correct.

Whilst some progress was made during the time of the MDGs, the efforts made proved to be far from a total success, from whatever perspectives and by whatever criteria were selected. More aspirations than realism again, as well as by 2010 the existence of a far lower level of interest in education among development agencies, as reported by a World Bank representative, Elizabeth King, who had been present at both the 1990 and the 2010 events, (King, 2011). Twenty years on from the enthusiastic first meeting at Jomtien, in the Education for All conference (WCEFA, 1990), there were far fewer development agencies and conference delegates present and less urgency concerning the place of education as a key factor. Education for All had fully transformed into the more measurable and less meaningful Universal Primary Education, with schooling replacing the wider concept of basic education. Quantity had emerged as key in areas such as enrolment numbers and other aggregates, at the expense of the qualitative factor.

This article builds on the 2012 paper and uses it to derive a base point for comparison for the current investigation, which looks to examine the proposed place and role of education in the SDGs.

The method used is a reflective and comparative exercise, with an analytical look at the process by which the SDGs have been developed and the outcomes from the development process so far. In a recent report from Devex (Walder, 2016), regarding what it described as an SDG data deluge, the United Nations Statistical Commission was said to have approved, on the final day of its 47th session, a "draft global indicator framework" which could be used to measure the level of success of the SDGs, setting the scene for a large and complex "industry" to evaluate the success and to ruminate on the worth of the concept and its implementation. The global indicator framework was further developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) at the 48th session of the United Nations Statistical Commission held in March 2017 (UN Stats, 2017).

The time taken and the resources involved in this reflection on the whole process of establishing the greatly enlarged number of goals with their all-encompassing and rather general nature, make measurement tedious, difficult and something of a problematic exercise, leading to an outcome which is highly probable to detract from their effectiveness and a costly one in human resource terms.

Part one of the paper considers first the MDGs and the degree of achievement resulting from them, especially in respect of the goals relating to education. The focus then shifts to the SDGs and how these and the process around them compares to that of the previous set of goals. A notable feature to emerge is the extension in the number of goals (expansion in scope and scale) as well as the expansion in the proposed measures and evaluation of outcomes which accompany the new set of goals.

In Part two of the paper, some investigation of the worth of this extension of activity is undertaken and the process is analysed and evaluated, with a focus on education and its place in this construct of development objectives and progress in achieving the goals, before the paper is completed by an attempt to draw conclusions from the study.

Part One: The MDG context and the SDG prospect

"The drafting and adopting of the MDGs was not neat and organised, but chaotic and full of disagreements and difficult compromises. Most importantly, the Millennium Declaration does not contain a set of goals; it required creative reading as well as tough negotiating before it was possible to extract eight MDGs from the Declaration." This description of the process is taken from Spijkers and Honniball (2014) and it suggests a lack of clarity and focus in the formulation of the original MDGs, with a considerable amount of political trading and dealing being involved, rather than consideration of the worth or appropriateness of the targets chosen and the measures to be set as criteria for judgement as to their success. The SDGs appear to have followed a similarly diffuse and politically motivated process of their own.

Poverty reduction measured in income terms was the MDGs' principal focus, at least in terms of that being the number one goal. Education was

included as an explicit goal in the set of eight goals that were eventually decided upon, although supporters of other goals which were not explicitly included, and those looking for more sustainability issues, were less than totally convinced by the range of coverage of the eight areas chosen, either for lack of completeness or because their own favourites did not make an appearance.

The MDGs in retrospect

The MDGs would appear to have been intended to concentrate the focus of aid programmes and to have been aimed at reducing overlap, thereby increasing the effectiveness of assistance programmes, as well as focusing on the key goals for development. They achieved some things, but never achieved 100 percent of the targets as set. In respect of education the degree of achievement can be broadly judged from Dunuan, Jackson and Ali (2012). 100 percent achievement was never going to be accomplished and the level of achievement was far from uniform; some countries came close, others lagged considerably. The confusion or conflation of "formal primary education" with "basic education" was an issue. Goals became defined in terms of the measurable targets rather than the principles and objectives underlying them.

There were a total of eight goals set out, namely:

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
Goal 2: *Achieve universal primary education*
Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women
Goal 4: Reduce child mortality
Goal 5: Improve maternal health
Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability
Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

These eight goals were added to by various proposals, aims, targets and indicators, with many people and organisations involved, not just UN bodies, but also the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank and others, all with their own favourites amongst the goals, and the aims and objectives underlying them. The priority was given to Goal one by many of the bodies and the

measurement of it was usually taken as income poverty with an absolute headcount poverty ratio used to measure the percent of the population beneath a set poverty line. Less attention was given to the use of measures such as the Amartya Sen-inspired Human Development Index (HDI) which is broader than National Income measures and which has an educational aspect to it, with the education index derived from mean years of schooling and the expected years of schooling as a component of the total index, along with life expectancy and income, although the latter, importantly, is calculated in a manner which gives it less importance than the other two as income per capita rises (UNDP, 2015). The HDI remains a simplification of development, but an improvement over the simple poverty headcount and National Income approach, especially for present purposes, as it includes the completed school years for those aged 25 years and over, plus the expected school years for those children who are of school entry age. It is in fact closer to the more complete measures of Basic Education and the idea of Education for All than that of Universal Primary Education. It still has issues in the form of the qualitative aspects of the completed school years and the actual amount of attendance reflected in a "completed school year", but it is more effective than relying upon school enrolment numbers.

The Gender goal, number three of the eight goals, also includes a significant education element in terms of the universality of access to education and the way in which this extends the ability to develop abilities and capabilities in the sense that Amartya Sen (2010) envisaged them. Sen sees a person's capabilities as the essence or substance of real freedom. Wealth was a means to an end; capabilities when fully developed meant that something far more substantive was possible.

> By proposing a fundamental shift in the focus of attention from the *means* of living to the *actual opportunities* a person has, the capability approach aims at a fairly radical change in the standard evaluative approaches widely used in economics and social studies. (Sen, 2010, p. 253)

True freedom in a development context implies the absence of capability deprivation (Sen, 1999). Education can be viewed as fundamental to ensuring a minimisation of capability deprivation and therefore as central to development. The MDGs fare well in the sense of focusing on poverty reduction, and fare well in the sense of allowing some degree of capability

enhancement and lessening capability deprivation, not least because of having education as a prominent goal. Bruns, Mingat and Rakotomolala (2003) saw this as important in the way in which the MDGs could function and focus upon universal primary education and education for all, not to mention facilitating and allowing an enhancement of high levels of capabilities including an individual's abilities to think and reflect, make informed choices and looking to have their voice heard in society. This stresses that education for all and universal primary education are not stylistic variants of expressing the same objective. Universal primary education can more easily be measured, but remember not all things worth counting are countable and not all things that count, are worth counting, according to Albert Einstein (n.d.). With respect to the MDGs, and especially the education goal, an awful stress has been placed on the ability to count and measure the achievement of targets and goals, rather than focusing on the aspects that count. The prospect for the SDGs appears to be more of the same, with more things to count and with less prominence given to the importance of education, whether it be categorised as Education for All or Universal Primary Education, measured in enrolments, in completion or any other metric that can be devised.

From the MDGs to the SDGs

The eight goals of the MDGs have become 17 goals for the SDGs with a vast array of targets and measures attached to each of them. This causes questions to arise including:

- Is there likely to be more, or less focus and achievement?
- Will the apparent deficiencies of the MDGs be addressed or is it a case of more goals are better than fewer?

Including more people and more agencies to fight over the whole process means fewer people complaining that their voice has not been heard, so that the process, in the end, becomes more important than the underlying principles and concepts themselves, and it is the process that is focused on and lauded rather than the outcomes.

It is hypothesised here that the focus is likely to be more diffuse with 17 goals and that the attempt to address perceived deficiencies in the MDGs will, as a result, not be successful. Instead it is felt likely that what will result is more

akin to a case of more goals, more targets and more talk, but no more positive outcomes. The SDG process was seen by Spijkers and Honniball (2014) as likely to be better in the sense that a wider range of participants were included in the process, although not all were content even then that their views and voices had been adequately heard, and much more could and should have been included. This could be interpreted as indicative of the way in which the SDGs have multiplied the number and the scope of the goals, and that inherent in the continuing process of further developing the SDGs is the potential for the net to be spread even wider than it has at present. This is certainly an example of the process being viewed as more important than the outcomes.

The 17 SDGs are:

Goal 1: End all poverty
Goal 2: End all hunger
Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives promote well-being for all ages
Goal 4: *Lifelong quality education for all*
Goal 5: Achieve gender equality
Goal 6: Ensure sustainable sanitation and water availability
Goal 7: Ensure access to modern sustainable energy
Goal 8: Sustainable economic growth with decent work for all
Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, industrialisation and innovation
Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and between nations
Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, sustainable, etc
Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production
Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
Goal 14: Conserve and use marine resources sustainably
Goal 15: Sustainably use ecosystems
Goal 16: Peaceful and inclusive societies; justice for all and inclusive institutions
Goal 17: Revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development

In addition to the increased number of goals for the SDGs, there are 232 indicators (or a total of 244 with a few repetitions under different goals), all statistical and of varying abilities to be counted, but all at a significant level of resource costs in the counting process. Where the responsibility for the counting of these is laid at the feet of human resource-poor developing

countries, it represents a major challenge to their ability to achieve progress on achieving the things that count, rather than concentrating on what can be counted.

Where does education fit?

In place of goal 2 of MDGs we now have goal 4 of the SDGs. It is still highly placed towards the top of the list amongst a selection of goals that have appeal as generally desirable aspects of development. There is unlikely to be great criticism of poverty and hunger elimination as primary goals, but elimination, especially if poverty is measured in a relative manner, is a difficult goal to achieve. If it is measured in an absolute manner, such as through a headcount process and set poverty level then there are difficulties with the process in terms of degree of reliability and cultural meaning in different national or regional settings, just as there were with the MDGs before. However, the top five goals could be fitted into a slightly expanded Human Development Index with little difficulty.

Sustainability issues themselves appear more explicitly later in the list, from goal 6 onwards. The disconnect leads to speculation as to why or how the sustainability aspects are encompassed in the title of the goals this time round and how the sustainability and the human development indicators of goals 1 to 5 will be integrated. Some of these aspects of the problems can be seen from considering the example of education as described in goal 4 which is far less constrained in its objective under the MDGs. Aiming to ensure access to universal primary education or completion by 2015 is far clearer than attempting to ensure that all people have the benefit of inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.

Continuing attempts to cope with the task of defining and deciding on how to measure these rather loose objectives has been undertaken and they are principally focused on an exhaustive and detailed set of proposed objectives, which in the case of education can be set out as follows:

- *Complete* free, equitable and quality primary and *secondary* education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes, which encompasses the primary focus of the MDGs but expands that by age, cost and other indicators which beg several questions concerning what is judged

relevant and effective. Introducing access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education to enable children to be ready for primary education, extends this even further, not least in an age dimension. At the other end of the age scale, access to university and other tertiary, vocational and technical education is aimed for, with affordable and equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality provision.

- Increase by $x\%$ the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. This does not seem to totally define exactly what is being sought after, insofar as specific details are not specified, nor is it giving attention to the more abstract ideas of education as enhancing people's approach to problem solving and thinking. The $x\%$ relates to the ongoing discussions still taking place concerning the details of the agreement.

- 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. This is a noteworthy and admirable goal to aspire to and the general thrust can be viewed as worthwhile, but the arguments for it are not fully outlined. Ethnic minorities and other groups who are not children, do not have disabilities and are not indigenous, may still face disadvantages, but are not specifically mentioned here. It can be assumed that they are included, but the emphasis on certain groups does suggest someone's own priorities have been ordered here. How this fits into the sustainability question is less than totally apparent. There is a lack of any direct reference to sustainability. Some may argue or consider that the sustainability looked for in this case is a social one rather than any natural or physical environmental one. Similarly, the concern with ensuring that all youth and at least $x\%$ of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy seems to be valid, but in what sense? Is this just to ensure, along with vocational training, that the output of the educational system is suited and equipped to meet the labour force needs of the economy and nothing more? Is this "sustainable"?

The x variable certainly also needs further deliberation. The general difficulty appears to be that education, in the sense of the points mentioned so far, is subject to aspirational goals, rather than clear ones that are likely to be achieved. Education of increasing numbers of graduates has in many countries done little more than raise expectations, and in some cases debt levels, amongst the young in many developing countries without affording them the earlier mentioned goals of meaningful and suitable work. The mismatch of rising Indian engineering schools' output and rising graduate unemployment, or the increases in trained graduates in Kosovo, are but two examples of both a large and a small country facing such issues. The education aspirations of the SDGs do not necessarily fit with the specifics included in the goal itself. In terms of the bigger picture, not only is there internal inconsistency within goal 4 but overall none of this is essentially helpful in terms of addressing how education fits in with the SDGs rather than the MDGs.

Once the move is made to consider the sections of goal 4 in terms of sustainable development, there are some other difficulties that arise. Is education really part of the process or is it to be treated as a service area to achieve the success of the sustainability goals? Is the purpose of the process to ensure educational achievement or is it to ensure the change in attitudes, values and practice needed to facilitate a society willing and looking to try and achieve greater sustainability? The explanation of the details of goal 4 suggest that the requirements for this include:

- Ensuring that all learners acquire 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.* Not only is this a specific requirement of skills relating to sustainability, it concentrates on developing or determining cultural values and norms of behaviour, as determined by some "authority" rather than allowing those with a good education to make the decisions for themselves. There is a danger here that the place of education is that of reinforcing the rhetoric of sustainability rather than enabling a sound discussion, evaluation and assessment of the evidence

by people. Sen's human capability to reflect and choose is in danger of being replaced by dogma.

- *By 2020* expand by $x\%$ globally the number of scholarships for developing countries, especially Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Small Island Developing States (SIDSs) and African countries, to enrol in higher education, including vocational training, Information and Computer Technology (ICT), technical, engineering and scientific programmes in developed countries and other developing countries. This seems a position of some merit and a suitable role and place for education, but again the specificity of topics and categories of developing countries seem unnecessarily prescriptive. 2020 seems a relatively short time frame, although the scholarships' aim is probably achievable, depending upon the level at which x is set. As with the attempt to increase by $x\%$ the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially LDCs and SIDSs, the direct link to sustainability is less than clear. The same is true of the goal to ensure the building and upgrading of education facilities that are child-, disability- and gender-sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all. Worthy but somewhat nebulous in their current form.

Altogether it would appear that education is a positive goal, but located within a general wish list of subservient service goals, rather than placed clearly within the sustainability framework.

Part Two: Goals as focus, but at a cost

It is not just education that suffers from a somewhat inchoate structure of the SDGs and a lack of clarity. It is true of all 17 goals. In addition to the multiplicity of goals, the set of 232 proposed global SDG indicators will require the analysis of an unprecedented amount of data – and will pose a significant challenge for national statistical systems, in both developing and developed countries.

In the 1940s and 1950s, William Beveridge is reputed to have talked about the question of how much attention should be paid to the accuracy of measuring unemployment and how many resources should be allocated to

such measurement, rather than to achieving the policy goals and addressing the problems. The key for assessing the effectiveness of policy and practice was more in a consistent basis for judgement rather than continuing change resulting from attempts to improve accuracy. A similar set of criticisms came from the increasing requirements for assessment under the new project management techniques embodied in the Organisation for European Co-operation and Development, Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) criteria for monitoring development projects in more recent times. Such efforts emerged from the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) and the Accra Action Agenda (AAA) of 2008, which focused on four principles including one concentrating on management by results: Aid is focused on real and measurable impact on development. This implies that what counts is not necessarily important, it is what can be counted.

The framework for the SDGs which went through the UN General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council for eventual discussion and adoption, resulted in the United Nations Statistical Commission having approved a draft global indicator framework to measure Sustainable Development Goal success. The set of 232 separate proposed global SDG indicators (244 in total with three appearing three times each, and six more twice each) require the analysis of an unprecedented amount of data – and will pose a significant challenge for national statistical systems in both developing and developed countries.

The World Bank often declared the MDGs as key components in its multi-various reports on activities and outcomes, as well as discussions. If the 2014 report on mining activities is taken as a random case study to examine for this purpose, it cited four goals relating to eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, gender equality and women's empowerment, environmental sustainability and global partnership, but nothing relating to education. The SDGs seem unlikely to alter this situation. In the case of education support from the Bank, the goals mentioned are more likely to be related to the MDGs goals 2 and 3 and couched in terms of Education for All rather than Universal Primary Education (World Bank, 2014).

This requirement for data collection, processing and analysis, places a considerable burden on those countries who are already suffering from a shortage of skilled and experienced people to undertake such tasks. Despite

the enormous resource requirements involved, the framework which was placed before the UN General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council for consideration as to its adoption by both bodies, which has been further worked on since, does not seem to effectively have located education in a way that fits.

Conclusions

The conclusions drawn principally include: that issues of measurement can potentially alter the original objectives; that it is questionable as to whether the indicators are worth devoting the level of resources they require; and that the importance of Education in Development has been reduced in the shift from the MDGs to SDGs.

It seems unlikely that in the sense of finding a suitable place for education the SDG process will prove any more successful than did the MDG effort. Education for All in the MDGs became the achievement of Universal Primary Education, largely because this appeared to have easier measurable dimensions than the diffuse but more general Education for All. Education does indeed "count", it may be worth counting, but not at the cost of the resources that counting would demand. In the SDGs how education fits is much less than clear, but the first few goals including the education goal appear to play an introductory role to set the scene for the sustainability issues that follow, not having a real place in their own right. Education does not have the profile for the SDGs that it was accorded for the MDGs and it has become an area that is very diffuse and one that struggles to fit in with the new concentration on "sustainability".

There an issue with the term "sustainable" when education is focused on: the exact meaning in the case of education is unclear. If the definition of goal 2 of the MDGs was problematic, with the focus on the debate and the change of goal from basic education for all to universal primary education, because it was easier to measure, rather than because it was more effective in achieving better development, then in the SDGs the sustainability issues just add to the definition issue and add to the difficulty of measurement. The new indicators related to the education goal also increase the associated resource costs of measurement, without improving the nature of the proxies for educational improvement.

What the SDGs do give is a desire to achieve different things to those of the MDGs, with little if any likelihood of greater success in achievement in development of human capability. More and better teachers is not an indicator of educational achievement outcomes; it is an input, just more easily counted, not an indicator of what counts. More enrolments are an indicator of quantity, not an indicator of quality. Adding pre-primary, secondary, tertiary and lifelong learning to the wish lists is noble and may well be valuable. They are however aspirational and are more a means to an end. If that end is removing capability deprivation, then are they the best means to achieve that end. Even if that is the outcome effectively demonstrating it, achieving it by counting is all but impossible.

The last conclusion is to assert that the role of education for the SDGs is to explain and prompt thinking about the sustainability and the goals in an informed way and effective manner.

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