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Adult Education and Sustainable Development Goals

Kapil Dev Regmi

University of British Columbia

ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines some key documents published towards formulating a set of post-2015 development as well as educational goals. The paper argues that even though 'lifelong learning for all' has been recommended as an overarching post-2015 educational goal adult education is not considered important. The paper identifies three major factors—overemphasis on measurements and comparisons, overreliance on corporate financing, and transnational governance of education—creating roadblocks for setting more holistic goals of education. The paper concludes that despite the importance of providing equitable educational opportunities especially to the adults of the most impoverished nations of the global South—known as the Least Developed Countries—adult education sector is completely neglected in the documents shaping post-2015 educational agendas.

Introduction

Education for All (EFA)—a set of six internationally accepted goals for education—was adopted in April 2000 at the World Education Forum (UNESCO, 2000). The third¹ and fourth² EFA goals were related to adult education. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG)—a set of eight goals with much wider significance than EFA goals—were adopted in September 2000 at the Millennium Summit of the United Nations. Despite the importance of adult education for securing progress towards achieving all MDGs, the Millennium Summit did not include adult education related goals. Most recent evaluation reports (UNDP, 2014) show that the education related MDGs are unlikely to be achieved by 2015 as 'an estimated 774 million adults, of whom

almost two-thirds are women' are still unable to read and write (UNESCO, 2014, p. 1). The EFA and MDG initiatives brought some positive outcomes in terms of increasing enrolment rates at primary level but they failed 'in addressing education in a holistic and integrated manner' (UIL, 2014, p. 7). One of the reasons behind this failure is: while prioritising the most achievable goals such as increasing enrolment rates at primary level some of the crucial agendas such as adult education—which function as prerequisites for achieving all MDGs—were given almost no considerations.

Both the MDGs and EFA goals are coming to an end in 2015 without bringing any substantive transformation in the lives of millions of people living in the most impoverished African and Asian nations known as the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). The term LDC represents a group of 49 countries identified by the United Nations as the most impoverished ones in terms of poverty, illiteracy and economic vulnerability. If the term global South is used to refer to all developing countries the LDCs can be understood as 'the South of the global South' since they are not catching up with many advanced developing countries such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS). Unlike other developing countries such as BRICS, the LDCs are 'vulnerable to shocks, including economic crises, climate-related events, natural disasters and health-related threats' (UN-OHRLLS, 2014, p. v). Despite these vulnerabilities of the LDCs, the MDGs and EFA initiatives did not set any differentiated goals nor did they provide any specific support measures for helping the LDCs achieve those goals. The most marginalised group of people are the poorest adults, mostly women, living in rural areas of the LDCs. Some initiatives taken by both civil society organisations (Duke & Hinzen, 2011)—such as The International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), and Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association (known as DVV International)—and national governments remained limited to adult literacy: generally understood as an ability

1 Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes

2 Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults

to read and write. No attempts have been made to provide functional as well as critical adult education opportunities to those marginalised adults. Those adults need a holistic approach to adult education that helps to enhance capabilities so as to enable them to critically analyse their day-to-day problems and find solutions through local means.

As the deadlines for both MDGs and EFA are fast approaching international community including the United Nations and other agencies such as UNESCO and the World Bank are engaged in various consultations to formulate a new set of goals—known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—to be achieved by 2030. Review of some key documents published towards setting SDGs reveals that the LDCs have not been a priority while setting post-2015 development as well as educational goals (Regmi, 2015). Moreover, how the new rhetoric of sustainable development addresses the contextual realities of those countries is not critically analysed. This paper undertakes a critical analysis of some key documents and answers some of the questions such as: what goals and targets are set especially for providing educational opportunities to the adults? What funding modalities are recommended for achieving SDGs; and what are their implications for ensuring learning opportunities for adults, especially for the most marginalised adult population of the LDCs? The paper identifies three major reasons on why adult education is neglected; and discusses how these reasons create roadblocks towards setting holistic adult education goals so as to address real needs of the adults of the LDCs.

Adult education in SDG initiatives

Since the third Earth Summit of 2012, known as Rio+20, the UN has involved in several consultations towards the formulation of SDGs to be achieved by 2030. Some of the major supranational organisations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and UNDP are organising conferences and consultations to discuss a new set of goals and targets. Some of the major consultations led by the UN include Thematic Consultation on Education in the post-2015 agenda (UNICEF-UNESCO, 2013), the High Level Panel (2013), and the Open Working Group (2014). The most important document outlining specifically educational agenda is The Muscat Agreement (UNESCO, 2014): an agreement reached among various stakeholders—such as ministers, heads of delegations, leading officials of multilateral and bilateral organizations, and some senior representatives of civil society and private sector organizations—in the global Education for All (EFA) meeting held in May 2014 in Muscat, Oman. The Muscat Agreement endorsed an educational goal proposed by previous consultations (High Level Panel, 2013; Open Working Group, 2014; UNICEF-UNESCO, 2013). Review of all these documents reveal that international community has agreed upon an overarching goal for education: ‘ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030’.

In light of the recommendations made by those consultations the Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, presented a synthesis report—at the Sixty-Eight Session of the General Assembly on December 4, 2014 (United Nations, 2014)—and endorsed the overarching goal for education approved by Muscat Agreement. This overarching goal will be the global educational goal in the post-2015 period once approved by the World Education Forum scheduled to be held in May 2015 in Korea. As reflected in all those key documents it is very likely that the UN Summit scheduled to be held during 25-27 September 2015—after four months of World Education Forum—in New York will officially declare ‘lifelong learning’ as an educational goal (one of the SDGs) for all countries including the LDCs.

Lifelong learning is an educational approach conceived by UNESCO during early 1970s (Faure et al., 1972) and implemented by the OECD (OECD, 1996) and European Union (European Commission, 2000) after 1990s as a strategy to enhance economic growth of their member countries. Until now lifelong learning had not been proposed as a global goal for education. This is a turning point in the history of international education because in the past it was the notion of EFA and literacy that dominated the educational policy discourses of the global South (Preece, 2011). It appears that the new rhetoric of lifelong learning is going to replace the notion of literacy as well as adult education. A crucial point to note here is that a humanistic notion (Rubenson, 2011) of lifelong learning espoused by UNESCO in early 1970s (Faure et al., 1972) takes adult education in a holistic sense. However, as the dominant discourse of lifelong learning is gradually geared towards more economic orientation (Rubenson, 2011) we need to be cautious on how adult education is conceived in the new rhetoric of lifelong learning as the post-2015 educational goal.

Adult education: a neglected sector

Adult Education is a fundamental human right ‘for the achievement of equity and inclusion, for alleviating poverty and for building equitable, tolerant, sustainable and knowledge-based societies’ (UNESCO, 2011, pp. 42-43). This definition manifests a holistic approach to adult education which does not limit it to skills training for getting employed in the job market. Since the first International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA I) of 1949, UNESCO has been advocating the importance of adult education for the economically poor countries of the global South. As agreed by 144 Member States at the CONFINTEA VI in 2009, adult education is ‘a significant component’ of the humanistic perspective of lifelong learning (UIL, 2014, p. 17; UNESCO, 2011). Though the terms adult education, adult learning, lifelong education, and lifelong learning are often used interchangeably the meanings of these terms differ significantly and have crucial policy implications. The term lifelong education introduced by UNESCO (Faure et al., 1972) highlights an inevitable necessity of providing learning opportunities to adults irrespective of their age, class, gender, and socioeconomic statuses. But during 1990s—not only adult education but also—lifelong

education was replaced by the term lifelong learning (Jarvis, 2014). Lifelong learning appears to have broader significance but in recent decades it has been used to place 'responsibility on the individual to learn and not the state or the employing organisation to provide learning opportunities' (Jarvis, 2014, p. 53). When we consider the most marginalised adults of the LDCs—who struggle to manage a basic living standard—the economic orientation of lifelong learning makes no sense because those adults are not capable of take responsibility for the type of knowledge and skills required to secure employment opportunities in the competitive job market.

In the context of setting educational goals for the post-2015 period, UNESCO and some civil society organisations—such as ICAE and DVV International, and the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE)—are actively advocating the role of adult education for alleviating poverty and reducing inequality both at national and international levels (Fernández, Hinzen, & Khan, 2015). Many consultations³, mainly those led by the civil society organisations, have recommended that UNESCO should continue 'to lead, coordinate and provide technical support for the implementation and monitoring of the future education agenda' (APREC, 2014, p. 2). As noted above the history of UNESCO reveals that it has been advocating for a holistic approach to adult education (UNESCO, 2011). However, even if UNESCO has been recommended as a major global agency to provide leadership in setting global agenda for education it has not been materialised and its adult education agenda has never been considered as a global educational goal. Scholars have argued that UNESCO has been a weaker ally of other supranational organisations such as the OECD, European Union and World Bank (Rubenson, 2011), basically when financial matters become more important than intellectual debates. Retrospective analysis of UNESCO's activities (Lee & Friedrich, 2011; Mundy, 1999; Regmi, in press) of the last six decades reveals that its attempts to improve educational status, basically adult literacy, in the Third World countries—many of them are now identified as the LDCs—had been repeatedly aborted because of funding problems which it has to secure from other donor agencies basically the World Bank.

As noted above, review of some recent documents related to post-2015 agenda reveals that in the SDG decade (2015-2030) 'lifelong learning' will be an overarching educational goal for all countries. Like in the OECD and EU member states 'lifelong learning' is going to shape educational discourses and subsequent educational policy developments in all countries of the global South including the LDCs. A crucial point to note here is that 'lifelong learning for all' appears as a new promise but what it really offers to the most marginalised adult population of the LDCs is not clear.

3 For example: (a) Dhaka Declaration (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002299/229965E.pdf>); (b) Bangkok Statement (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002306/230627E.pdf>); (c) Collective Consultation of NGO (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002280/228039e.pdf>)

Based on my critical engagement with the key documents (APREC, 2014; High Level Panel, 2013; Open Working Group, 2014; UNESCO, 2014; United Nations, 2014) I present how adult education is conceived in recent policy debates towards setting post-2015 educational agenda. And in the final section of the paper I present three major reasons that create roadblocks towards setting more holistic goals of adult education.

The High Level Panel (2013)—a group of eminent persons mandated by the United Nations—proposed 'quality education and lifelong learning' (p. 30) as an overarching goal for education for the first time, which, in a sense, influenced all subsequent reports (APREC, 2014; Open Working Group, 2014; UNESCO, 2014; United Nations, 2014) published towards setting the post-2015 educational agenda. In Panel's recommendations adult education did not become a separate priority goal but one of the major targets to complement that goal has an adult education component: 'increase the number of young and adult women and men with the skills, including technical and vocational, needed for work by x%' (High Level Panel, 2013, p. 30). However, this target focuses on skills and training as prerequisites for adults to get employment opportunities. Type of skills and training envisaged by the Panel completely excludes indigenous knowledge and traditional skills that majority of adults possess. Rather the Panel's report takes skills and training for pursuing employment opportunities in the job market as an unavoidable necessity. A critical assessment of the report reveals that 'lifelong learning' has been conceived in a very limited sense basically for promoting 'economic growth', which appears to be more rhetorical than realistic (Regmi, in press). Moreover, the report justifies the relevance of supranational organisations for financing and governing education and reiterates the economic dogma of human capital theory as the only possible educational strategy for poor countries (Regmi, in press).

The Open Working Group (2014) recommended four targets related to adult education. One of the most crucial targets is: 'to eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations' (Target # 4.5). Unlike the recommendations of the High Level Panel (2013), the Open Working Group proposed more inclusive goals but the Group also conceives adult education in a narrow instrumental sense, that is, providing skills and training for getting employment, preferably in the capitalistic job market.

Most of the documents produced by the leadership of UNESCO have highlighted the importance of adult education for achieving the SDGs. For example, the Muscat Agreement (UNESCO, 2014)—which partly builds on the recommendations of the Open Working Group (2014)—appears as the most inclusive and holistic towards adult education. The participants of the Muscat Meeting agreed that: (a) all youth and at least x% of adults reach a proficiency level in literacy and numeracy sufficient to fully participate

in society, with particular attention to girls and women and the most marginalized; (b) at least $x\%$ of youth and $y\%$ of adults have the knowledge and skills for decent work and life through technical and vocational, upper secondary and tertiary education and training, with particular attention to gender equality and the most marginalized; and (c) all learners acquire knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to establish sustainable and peaceful societies, including through global citizenship education and education for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2014, p. 3).

Why is adult education neglected?

Despite all those advocacies, especially of UNESCO and civil society organisations, adult education is completely neglected in key documents (Pingeot, 2014; Sachs & Schmidt-Traub, 2014; SDSN, 2015; Technical Advisory Group, 2014; World Bank-IMF, 2014) produced by major actors working for finalising post-2015 goals and targets. It appears that, like in the MDGs, goals related to adult education will be discarded at the final stage of SDG declaration. In what follows I present three reasons on why adult education sector is increasingly neglected in the post-2015 consultations and discussions.

OVEREMPHASIS ON MEASUREMENTS AND COMPARISONS

The High Level Panel (2013) recommended for 'a data revolution for sustainable development, with a new international initiative to improve the quality of statistics and information available to people and governments' (p. 21). As a follow up to the Panel's recommendations a Technical Advisory Group—a group of experts from the EFA Global Monitoring Report, the OECD, UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank—was formed to set post-2015 education indicators. One of the aims of the Technical Advisory Group (2014) is

to create a common scale of learning outcomes in the domains of literacy and numeracy that would place items from a range of surveys within a single scale, which is a first step towards facilitating comparisons between countries. Ideally, this would lead to a global set of items that could be integrated into national assessments to facilitate more robust measurement (p. 4).

The notion of measurements and comparisons stems from some international assessment systems introduced by the OECD such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). Measuring literacy and numeracy rates of adult population of the global South is not a bad practice since it could provide statistical evidences for devising new plans and programmes. Updated databases help supranational organisations such as the World Bank 'to monitor progress' (World Bank-IMF, 2014, p. 11) at regional and national levels. Statistical data would be helpful for national governments to make evidence based decisions on budget allocation and requesting financial assistance from bilateral and multilateral donors. But flip-side of overemphasis on educational outcomes and measurements is the danger that knowledge, experiences, and

occupational skills associated with traditional and indigenous practices will be further commodified and commercialised. International assessments as such have particular relevance in the countries of the global North because mega level organisations such as the OECD and EU want to make comparisons among nations to see the extent to which 'investments in human capital' (World Bank-IMF, 2014, p. 10) contribute to their national economy. But for the countries of the global South, particularly the LDCs—where poverty, hunger, malnutrition, epidemics such as HIV/AIDS and Ebola appear as most burning problems—such comparisons with an objective of increasing economic competitiveness make almost no sense.

Overemphasis on measurements and outcomes has reduced the value of experiential learning: a form of informal adult learning that comes through experiences and reflections on day-to-day activities (Jarvis, 2014). Such forms of adult learning have never been considered while devising global educational plans such as EFA/MDGs. Analysis of key documents shaping the SDGs and post-EFA agendas show that major recommendations have completely neglected the role of experiential learning. Experiences of adult population of the LDCs—such as their accumulated local knowledge in farming, conservation of local resources, and indigenous measures towards sustainability—have not been recognised; rather human capital knowledge and standardised testing systems are presented as inevitable prerequisites even for the adults of the poor countries. The notion of international assessments such as PIAAC and comparisons of adults' skills and competencies completely neglect the contextual realities of the LDCs.

OVERRELIANCE ON CORPORATE FINANCING

The Secretary-General of the UN set up Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) in August 2012 to recommend solutions on financial matters by liaising between development partners such as multilateral financing institutions, the private sector, and civil society. The SDSN is going to convene a conference on Financing for Development at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in July 2015. As outlined in its working paper (SDSN, 2015) funding for SDG will be arranged mostly from 'the private sector and capital markets'—by encouraging 'purely commercial private financing' (p. 6)—with an increased share of the Domestic Budget Revenues collected from individual countries. If those recommendations are approved in the UN Summit in September 2015 each LDC is forced to allocate at least '18 percent of their Gross National Income' (SDSN, 2015, p. 8) for achieving SDGs.

The SDSN takes all development sectors covered by the SDGs in the form of capital and recommends development partners to finance only those forms of capitals that it identifies as crucial for achieving SDGs: 'Sustainable Development requires investments across six complementary forms of capital: infrastructure, human capital, natural capital, business capital, intellectual capital (scientific and technological know-how), and social capital'(SDSN, 2015, p.

9). The SDSN aims to invest in human capital—which includes education and health sectors—and recommends for increasing the current amount of Official Development Assistant (ODA) for education from US Dollar 13 billion to 40 billion by 2020 (SDSN, 2015, p. 12). However, despite this rhetoric of increased ODA it appears that adult education sector in the LDCs will be further neglected because the requirement to allocate 18% of total budget for SDGs—which completely excludes adult education—will put too much pressure on LDCs' fragile economies hence preventing them to launch adult education programmes according to their contextual realities. Currently, the LDCs spend about 3.7% of their total gross domestic product on education (UNDP, 2014) and less than 1% of total education budget on adult education (Desjardins, 2013). The proposed SDG funding modality will encourage the primary funders of the SDGs such as 'banks and corporations' (SDSN, 2015, p. 8) not to invest in adult education as well as literacy because they do not fall under the parameters of human capital education.

INCREASED TRANSNATIONAL GOVERNANCE

As noted above SDGs will mostly be funded by banks and corporations. This implies that education sector of the aid-dependent countries will be controlled and governed by supranational financial institutions and corporations. In some post-2015 consultations attempts were made to oppose corporate financing for education. For example, APREC (2014) clearly noted that 'government is the primary duty bearer for efficient, equitable and sustainable financing of education' (p. 2). Similarly, the Global Campaign for Education⁴ recommended that 'governments have a responsibility to provide sufficient funding for equitable inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all' (Fernández et al., 2015, p. 81). As the LDCs are not able to bear full expenditure required for education there is a need for external financing. The directors of SDSN (Sachs & Schmidt-Traub, 2014) recommended that 'at least 50% of the total ODA should go towards the LDCs' (p. 11) particularly for helping them achieve the SDGs. Given the budget limitations of these poor countries increasing the amount of ODA is a better alternative than forcing them to take loans from financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (Fernández et al., 2015). But whether the increased amount of ODA will come along with further conditionalities is not clear. There is a danger that financial assistance might come at the cost of reduced control of the LDCs on their education system; for instance by obligating them to participate in international assessments such as PIAAC if they want to get ODA.

If ODA providers such as Development Assistance Committee force LDCs to follow their regulations the governing power of the LDCs will be constrained. As the proposed SDG funding modality takes 'public-private partnerships as innovative models' (Pingeot, 2014, p. 5) nations states are further discouraged to govern their education systems. According to SDSN (2015), a Multilateral Development

Finance Committee (MDFC) will be formed to 'provide periodic needs assessments of overall' financing for the SDG (p. 22). The report further claims that the governance of the MDFC 'must give full voice to key multilateral institutions' including the IMF, World Bank, and OECD (SDSN, 2015, p. 22). This implies that the provision of a 'strengthened participatory governance' (UNESCO, 2014, p. 2)—in which nation-states have primary role in educational governance—will be replaced by an external governance mechanism dominated by supranational organisations and transnational corporations.

Conclusion

Review of key documents published towards formulating the SDGs indicate that the field of education will suffer from corporatisation in the coming decades. The field of adult education will suffer the most because multinational corporations and major banks that are invited by the UN to make investments for achieving SDGs (United Nations, 2014) have an intention of producing most flexible, competitive, and the cheapest young labour force to fulfil the demand of global capital market. Hence, the noble initiatives taken in the Earth Summits such as Rio+20 towards creating an environmentally safer and socially equal as well as just world are gradually fading. The sustainable development agenda is now appropriated by supranational financial institutions and corporations for their own benefit. As claimed by Pingeot (2014), who examined the process towards the Post-2015 agenda, this is happening because the large multinational corporations such as Royal Dutch Shell, Exxon Mobil and Wal-Mart—whose representatives were provided with 'privileged access to UN policymaking' (p. 29)—are 'actively influencing the Post-2015 agenda' (p. 8) through their involvement in the High-Level Panel, the SDSN, and to a lesser extent the Open Working Group.

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⁴ http://www.campaignforeducation.org/docs/post2015/GCE_POST2015_FINAL_GOAL_EN.pdf

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