



Education in the Post-2015 Development Agenda Regional Thematic Consultation in the Asia-Pacific

28 February and 1 March 2013, Bangkok, Thailand

OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

BACKGROUND

This regional thematic consultation on education in the post-2015 development agenda (referred to as “the Consultation” thereafter), held on 28th February – 1st March 2013 in Bangkok, Thailand, was co-organized by UNESCO Bangkok (Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education), the UNICEF Regional Office for East Asia and the Pacific (EAPRO), and the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) in partnership with civil society organizations. It brought together over 120 stakeholders from the Asia-Pacific region, including representatives from governments, non-governmental organizations (international, regional, national and local), universities and academia, teachers’ unions, disabled peoples’ organizations, and youth organizations.

This Consultation was convened to develop a collective voice from the region regarding education priorities for a post-2015 development agenda and, as an immediate result, to contribute to the debate of the global thematic consultation on education taking place in Dakar, Senegal in March 2013. The outcomes and recommendations of the Consultation will also feed into further discussions within the UN towards developing the possible contours of the post-2015 development agenda.

CONTEXT

The importance of the regional inputs from the Asia-Pacific region is to be seen against the backdrop of its great diversity and the large size of its population. These two aspects alone illustrate the development challenges and opportunities this region represents.

The Asia-Pacific is also characterized by rapid and dynamic economic growth, a growing number of middle income countries, innovation and technological advances. However, these overall economic trends belie vast disparities between and within countries and economic growth has not necessarily resulted in equivalent increases in living standards in all countries. Trends show that these gaps are widening, rather than narrowing, and are compounded by a diversity of challenges such as demographic change with huge youth bulges in some contexts and a rapidly aging population in others, increased labour mobility and migration, environmental degradation and natural disasters and continuing presence of conflicts in parts of the region.

As concerns education, remarkable progress has been made in improving access across all levels of education. However, there are persistent disparities among and within countries including access to schooling, equity and quality of education and levels of learning achievement. In particular, considerable progress has been made to

improve youth and adult literacy, but is still inadequate to meet needs in Asia-Pacific countries. Indeed, the Asia-Pacific contains the largest number of illiterate adults of any region in the world. Concomitantly, most countries have now also become increasingly concerned with improving the quality of education, increasing access to post-basic education and to skills development.

VISION AND PRINCIPLES

The Consultation **reaffirmed** that education is a basic human right for every person, a public good for all societies, an essential condition for human fulfilment, sustainable development, peace and democracy, and an important vehicle for global citizenship.

The Consultation **recognized** that the Education for All (EFA) goals and the education-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are yet to be achieved in many countries. At the same time, the depth and scope of how education is linked to a post-2015 development agenda need to go beyond current goals. In this view, the emphasis of education policy and reform needs to go beyond the provision of academic knowledge and skills often confined to economic growth, to promote education's central role in forging more just, peaceful, democratic, tolerant, resilient, transformative and inclusive societies and in providing people with the understanding, competencies and values they need to resolve many challenges that our societies and economies are facing.

The Consultation **acknowledged** the outcomes of the two Asia-Pacific regional high-level expert meetings on the future of education and learning in May and November 2012 respectively which recommended a new, fresh and comprehensive look at education, with learning restored as the core concern in all aspects of education. It also **acknowledged** the outcomes of the "13th Regional Meeting of National EFA Coordinators: The Big Push" held on 26-27 February 2013 and other research findings which testify to the need to rethink and reorient education towards a stronger emphasis on quality learning for all.

The Consultation **acknowledged** that many changes have occurred in the "state of the world" since the advent of both the EFA goals and the MDGs – each with a clear impact for education. In the Asia-Pacific region, the main considerations are its rapid socio-economic development, widening disparities, demographic changes and environmental challenges as detailed above. These changes require that sustainable development, broadly defined to cover social, economic, environmental, and cultural issues, should be upheld more than ever as a key principle in promoting inclusive and equitable societies in the future.

The Consultation **highlighted** that the root causes of disparities, not only in terms of access to quality education but also of learning outcomes, should be seriously addressed and need to feature prominently across all education-related goals, targets and indicators in the future development agenda. The eventual aim is to eradicate all forms of exclusion, marginalization and discrimination in education, based on differences in age, gender, wealth, ethnicity, caste, nationality, religion, language, displacement, geographical location, disability, culture, citizenship status, socio-economic background and health conditions. In this view, it was recommended that disparity reduction targets should be included in any post-2015 development agenda.

The Consultation **asserted** the obligation of governments to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all, at least at the basic education level, and underlined the importance of genuine partnerships - between government and various stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, parents, school administrators, teachers, children, young people, organizations representing marginalized groups including disabled people and the wider community - around national education policies and priorities, with a clear definition and understanding of respective roles and responsibilities.

The Consultation **underscored** the need for clear, concise and measurable targets to ensure and monitor the achievement of equitable access to education, the quality of learning, values underlying global citizenship, skills needed for life and work, as well as progress in governance, financing and partnerships.

The Consultation **emphasized** that quality learning for all should be the unifying umbrella theme for national education policy reforms and the future global development agenda. Learning is a continuous process throughout all levels of education, from early childhood care and education to higher education to vocational training, and is acquired through various delivery modes, from a lifelong and “life-wide” learning perspective. In this view, lifelong learning should be considered a key, guiding principle in education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above, the Consultation made the following **recommendations**:

A. Equitable and Inclusive Access to and Participation in Learning

1. Equitable and inclusive access to quality learning should be ensured for all (children, youth and adults), at all levels of education according to country contexts and priorities. It is the obligation of governments to provide at least free and compulsory basic education for all. Attention should be paid to reaching gender equality in education and to mainstream children with special needs. Policies guaranteeing educational provision need to begin with early childhood care and education and go beyond primary schooling. Early childhood care and education plays a crucial role in building strong foundations for learning. Primary education provides the foundational skills for further learning such as literacy and numeracy. Post-primary education, at the crossroads of learning and life, is increasingly a minimum requirement for people’s empowerment for a decent life and work. Higher education is crucial not only for the formation of specialised skills and capacities required for knowledge economies, research and innovation, but also for the development of the communities in which they serve.
2. Those who missed formal schooling and lack foundational skills such as basic literacy and numeracy should be given special attention in the post-2015 development agenda. While there should be a strong effort to bring these groups back to school, alternative pathways to quality learning should be supported and recognized. Multiple learning pathways and multiple entry points and re-entry points at all ages and at all educational levels should be provided.
3. Building learning cities and communities is a dream within reach. Education reforms should aim to transform schools into learning hubs. This requires the education sector to engage and work with other sectors.
4. Education systems should reflect and welcome the diversity of the social fabric and aim to achieve social cohesion by doing so. Therefore, education systems should be able to cater to multiple needs and circumstances by promoting flexibility and respect for diversity so as to achieve minimum, essential core standards of quality and achievement and a maximum level of inclusiveness.

B. Quality of Learning

1. Key factors of quality learning are effectiveness and relevance, and quality learning must be an area of key emphasis in education beyond 2015.
2. Quality teachers are central to quality learning, right from the early childhood stage and onwards. Quality learning requires a professional, committed teaching force which is able to

respond to diverse learning needs and is supported by effective and safe learning environments and competent school leadership and is underpinned by pioneering findings of scientific research on learning. Safe and inclusive learning environments are of particular importance for girls and marginalized groups, including the disabled. Appropriate systems and policies are needed concerning teacher pre- and in-service training, recruitment, certification, deployment, professional development, career advancement, accountability, remuneration, as well as their working environment and conditions of service.

3. Attention should also be paid to appropriate curricula and teaching/learning processes which enable the achievement of meaningful and relevant learning outcomes including ‘non-cognitive’¹ skills and competencies.
4. The potential and innovative use of new technologies by teachers and students to support lifelong and “life-wide” learning should also be fully tapped, including improving learning of low performers.
5. The future education agenda should encourage a systems approach to quality learning, which involves reasoned consideration of all building blocks, not merely selected ones, and of learning in education policy reforms. The principle question in this endeavour is: “What do students deserve as a learning experience and what subjects should be taught to develop all-round personalities?” Improved learning requires a more holistic attention to sustainable development, cultural diversity, human rights education, gender equality, peace education, the use of the mother tongue in education, the learning of other languages including sign language, international languages, and traditional knowledge.
6. It also requires a proper participatory monitoring and assessment system that evaluates learning processes and outcomes. This includes current formative and summative forms of learning assessment. Ways to measure not only academic performance but also other outcomes such as critical thinking, innovation, flexibility cooperation, need to be developed. Increasingly, assessment should be for learning, not just of learning.

C. Global Citizenship, Skills and Competencies for Life and Work

1. Responsible and global citizenship should become an important theme for education in the post-2015 development agenda. Education systems should enable all children, young people and adults to participate actively and responsibly in their communities and in the increasingly interconnected and globalizing world. Values and attitudes such as embracing diversity, non-discrimination, empathy, communication, conflict resolution, and environmental awareness are vital aspects of responsible and global citizenship.
2. The future increasingly requires that people acquire those skills and competencies required to be more creative and innovative, able to adapt to and assimilate change and able to continue learning. Those ‘non-cognitive’ skills are rarely measured by current assessments and examinations. Broader life skills should also be promoted, which in general include psycho-social skills, income-generation skills, entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods, and healthy behaviours and skills to prevent unwanted pregnancies and HIV. There is also an increasing need for traditional knowledge and skills.

¹ There is an ongoing debate around the term ‘non-cognitive skills’. Alternative terms have been suggested, including ‘21st century skills’, ‘non-academic skills’, ‘higher-order skills’, ‘transversal skills’ and ‘transferable skills’. In the absence of an agreement on a different term, ‘non-cognitive skills’ will be used in this document to refer to skills that are non-academic and include communication skills, inter-personal skills, creative thinking, entrepreneurship and global/responsible citizenship skills.

3. The need for people (youth, adults, and especially women and persons with disabilities) to acquire relevant technical and vocational skills combined with necessary 'non-cognitive' skills for a decent life and work in a rapidly changing world should be fully reflected in the post-2015 development agenda.
4. Education systems should be revisited and reoriented to facilitate pathways between different education streams and the transition from school to work, and even from work to school, while allowing for the acquisition of an appropriate mix of generic and vocational skills.

D. Governance, Financing and Partnership/Cooperation

1. Governance is a cross-cutting theme for education and development beyond 2015. Responsible and participatory governance is required to strengthen transparent and accountable education systems; to reduce and eventually eliminate corruption, malpractice, and inequalities in access to quality learning; and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of policy implementation.
2. Accountability frameworks need to be put in place at all levels, from school to the national level. Structured spaces for citizen participation, including that of youth, need to be created for planning, and monitoring in the education system as means for enhanced systemic transparency and accountability. Mechanisms for independent verification of government data and grievance redress mechanisms are critical.
3. The primary obligation to deliver education by governments is non-negotiable. However, partnerships with all stakeholders, including private foundations and communities are critical, and they will be most effective if their missions and work priorities are aligned with and contribute to government priorities.
4. Legal arrangements and ethical standards should be established to strengthen the commitments of governments and their implementation should be actualized in terms of allocating appropriate budget for education. To this end, the post-2015 development agenda should indicate a fixed percentage of fiscal revenue as a benchmark for governments to achieve. Clear and progressive targets for domestic investment in education, including early childhood care and education programmes, technical vocational education and training (TVET) and non-formal education, to meet the international benchmarks of 6 per cent of GNP should be set and its full utilisation ensured, while the development partners will endeavour to respect their previous commitment to deliver on the promise of 0.7 per cent of the GNP for official development aid (ODA). Innovative sources of financing which support the government provision of education should be sought. In addition, appropriate systemic reforms to ensure financial transparency and earmarked allocations for marginalized communities should be promoted.
5. Education reform and strategies in each country should be reflective of national and local contexts, aiming to reach out to all people, especially the disadvantaged. In this light, a sustained equitable share of the education budget should be allocated to the alternative education pathways catering to them. Any alternative provision of education should not compromise the quality of learning.
6. Partnerships should include all stakeholders who can contribute to the common goal of education for all. While partnerships for education are important, it is the primary obligation of governments to provide education as a basic right. Stronger regulatory frameworks for the private sector need to be put in place where private players are currently significant providers.

7. Meaningful participation of learners, communities, and civil society in education governance should go beyond intermittent consultation, and should be institutionalised in formal mechanisms from the national level down to the school level.

E. *Possible scenarios and options on how to best articulate and position education in a post-2015 development agenda*

1. Education should feature prominently in the post-2015 development agenda given its direct relevance to the achievement of all the other development goals.
2. There should be an education-specific agenda which should be in convergence with all education goals in the post-2015 development agenda.
3. The post-2015 development agenda on education should be guided by an overall vision and underlying principles of equity, human rights and importantly sustainable development. Quality learning for all should be an overarching, universally relevant goal, with possibility of flexible adaptation in terms of target setting at national and local levels. In order to ensure that education goals contribute to narrowing disparities within a country, it is crucial to set targets for – and systematically monitor - disparity reduction.
4. A sector-wide and holistic approach should be taken to develop education in the post-2015 education framework.
5. Education should be linked to all other development challenges, such as education and governance, education and economic/industrial development, education and innovation, and education and culture.
6. Country situations will change and evolve, and the post-2015 development framework needs to be flexible enough to adapt to the changes, including the possible advent of conflict or natural disaster.
7. The goal for education in the post-2015 development agenda could embrace the key aspects encapsulated in the discussions of the Consultation and stated as follows: *‘To guarantee equitable opportunities for all to participate in transformative quality learning at all levels aiming to provide the knowledge, skills, competencies and values vital to achieve inclusive and sustainable development’.*