The education systems of Asian nations such as South Korea, Japan and Singapore are the envy of the western world in terms of measured achievements against global standards. But behind the successes, lurk growing problems of inequality, overemphasis on rote learning, academic corruption and graduates poorly prepared for the world of work. Much needs to change.
This year marks a historical juncture in global education, as the international development community moves towards the adoption of the “Sustainable Development Goals for 2030.” This shared aspiration towards sustainable development requires us to resolve common challenges and overcome tensions associated with current development trends. While economic growth and wealth creation have reduced global poverty rates, vulnerability, inequality and exclusion have increased within and across societies. Moreover, unsustainable patterns of economic production and consumption contribute to global warming, environmental degradation and an upsurge in natural disasters. Finally, although technological development contributes to greater interconnectedness and offers new avenues for exchange, co-operation and solidarity, we also see an increase in intolerance and conflict.

Education must adapt to such challenges and tensions by providing individuals and communities with the capability to adapt and respond. Re-envisioning the purpose of education and the organization of learning is essential to ensuring sustainable human and social development. It is true that education alone cannot hope to solve all development challenges. But equitable access to effective and relevant learning opportunities for all is crucial. Sustaining and enhancing the dignity, capacity and welfare of the human person, in relation to others and to nature, should be the fundamental purpose of education in the 21st century. Education must be at the core of the sustainable development agenda.

We must reaffirm a humanistic vision based on

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From May 19 to 22, UNESCO’s World Education Forum 2015 was held in Incheon, South Korea, and out of that gathering an ambitious agenda to further global educational goals was agreed, dubbed ‘Education 2030.’ If achieved, the world could make significant advances in addressing challenges still facing governments and educators in addressing the needs of those who don’t yet have the sustainable skills and knowledge to benefit from and contribute to global economic progress. Qian Tang explains what is at stake in Education 2030.
WHAT WE NEED IS A MORE FLUID APPROACH TO LEARNING, AS A CONTINUUM. THE MANY CHANGES IN THE WAYS THAT LEARNING TAKES PLACE FAVOR THE IDEA OF A NETWORK OF LEARNING SPACES.

as a guide to dealing with the transformation of the global learning landscape, one in which the role of teachers and other educators continues as central to facilitating learning for the sustainable development of all.

This was the backdrop of the World Education Forum 2015 held in Incheon, South Korea in May 2015, at which representatives of governments, educational authorities, development agencies, bilateral and multilateral organizations, civil society, the teaching profession, young people and the private sector came together to define a global education agenda for the future.

LOOKING BACK TO SEE AHEAD

The forum was an historic opportunity to reframe the global education agenda in light of emerging challenges for sustainable human and social development. Building on a stocktaking made in realizing the goals and targets set out in the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goal (MDG) frameworks adopted in 2000, the Forum defined the contours of a future agenda in the Incheon Declaration: “Education 2030: Towards Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All.” In looking ahead, we must necessarily review past experience. The proposed Education 2030 agenda is firmly grounded in the lessons learned from monitoring international educational development over the past 15 years.

SPECTACULAR EXPANSION AT ALL LEVELS

Across the world, there has been a remarkable and unprecedented expansion in participation in education at all levels. Enrolment in pre-primary education — recognized as essential to maximizing children’s learning potential and contributing to equality in learning outcomes later down the road — has increased by nearly two-thirds since 2000. Net enrolment in primary school has risen to an estimated 93 percent worldwide, with spectacular progress in some countries. Access to secondary education has also expanded over the past decade, with enrolment rising to almost 45 percent in low-income countries, and to close to 75 percent in middle income countries. Globally, illiteracy fell by some 23 percent, and progress has been particularly notable among youth, who have benefited from increased access to schooling. Access to higher education has also undergone a spectacular expansion over the past 15 years. Global enrolment in tertiary education has doubled since 2000 with some 200 million students worldwide today, half of whom are women. Finally, there has been significant progress in narrowing the gender gap in education since 2000, with a larger share of girls and women accessing different levels of formal education.

There is, therefore, much to celebrate. We have made significant progress in ensuring the right to basic education since 2000, driven in part by the EFA and MDG frameworks. This progress is reflected in improved school enrolment ratios; fewer out-of-school children; higher literacy rates, particularly among youth; and a narrowing of the gender gap. It has also inspired the more ambitious targets proposed within the 2030 Education agenda that now aim to ensure early childhood development, pre-primary, primary and secondary education for all as well as universal literacy among youth.

While adopting a more ambitious agenda, however, we must also recognize that persistent inequalities in access to basic education and learning remain both between and within countries — indeed, national averages in many countries mask striking inequalities in educational attainment and outcomes. Some 58 million children and 70 million adolescents worldwide still do not have access to effective basic education. The picture is particularly troubling when it comes to literacy, with some 780 million adults — nearly two-thirds of whom are women — lacking the literacy skills that would allow them to participate fully in society. Traditional factors of marginalization in education, such as gender and the urban/rural divide, continue to combine with income, language, minority status, HIV and AIDS, age — especially in the case of adolescent girls — and disability, to create “mutually reinforcing disadvantages,” particularly in low-income and conflict-affected countries.

Bearing in mind these persistent challenges, the proposed Education 2030 agenda has strengthened the focus on equity and inclusion in order to realize our collective commitment to “meet the basic learning needs of all children, youth and adults.” This is a necessary precondition if education is to contribute to the evolving knowledge societies of the 21st century.

IMPROVING QUALITY AND RELEVANCE

Beyond access, poor quality education all too often leads to insufficient basic skills acquisition even for those in school. It is estimated that 130 million children are still not able to read, write or count adequately even after at least four years in school. The alarming scale of the world’s “learning crisis” has shifted the global conversation from a traditional focus on access to a concern with the actual learning taking place. We need, therefore, to strengthen our efforts to improve the quality of education and the relevance of learning. In addition to ensuring effective learning, we must also guarantee that learning is relevant to the contemporary challenges of sustainable human and social development. Education must be both adaptive and transformative. It must foster the critical competencies required for responsible and active citizenship. Enabling individuals and communities to adequately address contemporary challenges and establish the conditions for a better future for all must be an essential goal of education.

This renewed attention to the purpose and relevance of learning for sustainable human and social development is one of the defining features of the 2030 Education agenda.
A central function of education is to foster the skills and competencies that will enable learners to support themselves and their families, and contribute to the sustainable economic development of the communities in which they live. Decent work and entrepreneurship can be promoted through well-designed education, including technical and vocational education and training that prepares learners for the labor markets of tomorrow. In a time of rapid technological development, demographic shifts and high unemployment, a narrow focus on job-specific skills reduces the ability of graduates to adapt to the fast-changing demands of employers; greater emphasis must therefore be placed on developing — and recognizing through validation and accreditation mechanisms — transferable skills that can be used across a range of occupations and promote the capacity of learners to regularly update their skills through lifelong learning.

The Education 2030 agenda also underlines the need for more effective partnerships between educators, training providers, employers and labor unions, in order to ensure that learning in formal, non-formal and informal settings is not isolated from the realities of the workplace.

**A CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE**

The learning landscape in today’s changing world has implications for traditional forms of educational governance and presents new challenges for the implementation of the global Education 2030 agenda. These challenges have to do with the management of lifelong learning systems, the multiplication and diversification of stakeholders, the domestic and international financing of education and the regulation of education as a public good.

The spectacular growth in Internet connectivity and mobile penetration is radically transforming the methods, content and spaces of learning. The Internet has transformed how people access information and knowledge, how they interact and how they engage in social, civic and economic activities. The increased access to diverse sources of knowledge is expanding opportunities for learning that may be less structured and more innovative. This transformation of the educational landscape has seen growing recognition of the importance and relevance of learning outside formal institutions. What we need is a more fluid approach to learning as a continuum. The many changes in the ways that learning takes place favor the idea of a network of learning spaces. Non-formal and informal spaces of learning must better interact with and complement formal education and training institutions from early childhood through life. In order to operationalize open and flexible lifelong learning systems, we need effective systems for the recognition, validation and assessment of competencies acquired, regardless of the formal, non-formal or informal pathways undertaken. It is in this spirit that the proposed education goal for 2030 is framed in terms of lifelong learning for all.

**GROWING PRESSURES ON PUBLIC FINANCING**

The expansion of access to schooling over the past decade reflects and encourages a growing demand for secondary and tertiary education as well as for technical and vocational education and training. This is placing growing pressures on public financing of education. There is a need to ensure more efficient use of limited resources and to promote greater accountability in the investment of public resources for education. Moreover, it is necessary to seek ways in which to supplement public education budgets through greater fiscal capacity, new partnerships with non-state actors and advocacy for increased official development assistance. The global 2030 Education agenda — with its ambition to expand access to quality education and training at all levels — will require higher levels of more secure and better-targeted funding. This will be a major challenge because many governments, particularly in low and lower-middle income countries, are unlikely to be able to increase their public education budgets to the required levels. If we want to bridge this resource gap, things will have to be done differently. Developing effective systems of governance, performance monitoring and accountability involving multiple stakeholders at different levels, can support a more transparent and rational allocation of resources and relieve the pressure on public education funding.

**THE DIVERSIFICATION OF STAKEHOLDERS**

While the state plays a central role in the provision of education, the scale of engagement of non-state actors at all levels of education is growing and becoming more diversified. This is partly the result of growing demand for voice, participation and accountability in public affairs. But it is also in response to the need to relieve pressures on public financing, given the spectacular expansion of access to all levels of formal education worldwide over the past two decades. In addition, the dynamics of international co-operation have significantly changed in the past decade, with a multiplication and diversification of development partners and a proliferation of non-governmental organizations, foundations, philanthropists and multilateral aid agencies, as well as emerging donors introducing new patterns of South-South and triangular co-operation. The diversification of stakeholders in education at both national and global levels is presenting new challenges for the state in the co-ordination of partnerships within and across sectors, in the monitoring of education as a shared responsibility and in the regulation of education as a public good.

**EDUCATION AS A GLOBAL COMMON GOOD**

While reaffirming that education is a public good, we must deepen this principle in the changing context of educational governance outlined above. The growing complexity of today’s world requires a comprehensive approach to education policy and a strengthening of the ethical principles that govern education as a common good. Considering education as a common good reframes the collective dimension of education as a shared social endeavor, rather than an individualistic socio-economic “investment.” It is not only the quality of life of individuals and families that is important, but also the quality of life that humans hold in common. Beyond the educational services available, the process of defining what kind of education is to be provided and for what kind of society is, in itself, a common good. The idea of the common good implies joint action and an inclusive and participatory process of public policy formulation and implementation with shared responsibility and commitment to solidarity at the local and global levels.

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**REFERENCES**


