

Introduction: Bringing out the Tensions, Challenges, and Opportunities within Sustainable Development Goal 4

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For the third time in three decades, world leaders reaffirmed their promise of education for all when they adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015. In doing so, they pushed the deadline forward by another 15 years, but they also agreed on a stronger and broader commitment to quality and equity in education. SDG 4, 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all and promote lifelong learning', commits to progress throughout the world at all levels of education, from preprimary through to university and beyond. However, in the few years since its adoption, SDG 4 has been compromised and contested throughout its implementation. This book examines the tensions, challenges, and opportunities within SDG 4, with a view toward informing and supporting its rights-based implementation.

There were no guarantees that education would be the subject of a stand-alone goal when the discussion on a new development agenda kicked off in 2012. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were viewed as an uneven success and were far from being met (UN, 2015a). The Education for All (EFA) goals were not met either and were largely unknown outside the education sector. There were also major challenges to consider, such as the climate and global financial crises, declining education and aid budgets, and rising inequality.

Whereas education was broadly considered to be one of the relatively successful MDGs, there was a more complex and sobering reality behind the global improvements in primary school enrolment and gender parity: Progress had been uneven and enrolment numbers had increased together with overcrowded and underequipped classrooms, unqualified teachers with worsening working conditions, and large disparity in both access and achievement between different groups. Patterns of inequality and exclusion had largely been reproduced, and the most marginalised communities had seen little progress (UNESCO, 2015a).

More than two decades of the EFA Agenda had left the education community impatient to learn from past mistakes and full of aspirations to take on

both old persistent challenges and newly emerging ones. Alongside other sectors, the education community mobilised to secure an ambitious stand-alone goal on education within the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. Beyond the inclusion of a separate goal on education within the new development agenda, there was, however, little agreement within the sector as to the specific targets to be included in the goal: how to define quality education, who should provide such education, and what minimum level of schooling should all young people in the world complete.

Rather than marking the end of these debates, the adoption of SDG 4 in September 2015 in some ways amplified tensions and diverging viewpoints within the sector. The education community continues to seek agreement on what the new agenda means in practice and what it will take to succeed. While it is ambitious and far-reaching in its targets, the agenda itself leaves much room for interpretation. The broad priorities, to which agreement was secured, are not tied to specific policies, implementation modalities, or financing arrangements, and there is minimal accountability for member states and international organisations.

Consequently, the different actors' mandates and ideological approaches are reflected in their respective SDG 4 efforts. There have been numerous attempts to reframe the agenda and alter its scope, such as deprioritising certain targets, particularly those on learning environments and teachers; denying the universality of the agenda and its relevance for rich countries; and overemphasising measurable and globally comparable learning outcomes at the expense of a broader notion of quality, which marginalises subjects that are more difficult to assess, such as education for sustainable development. This places SDG 4 implementation at the heart of tensions between an instrumentalist and rights-based approach to education.

Part of the tension arises from the fact that the SDGs simultaneously represent the world we aspire to create and the world in which we currently live. Agreed to by those in power in 2015, the agenda was bound to reproduce the power relations and imbalances of that time. Yet, the 2030 Agenda challenges the current system and its defining structural failures, pledges to rethink development as it has been understood, and opens up new opportunities for social, environmental, and economic justice. These two sides of the coin make it evermore important to reflect on the way forward, the inherent risks and opportunities, and the perverse incentives within global agendas.

Progress to date has been slow and time is tight; in fact, the age cohort that would be expected to finish upper secondary school in 2030 should already have started school! This book considers the education goal and targets as an opportunity to make desperately needed progress on education. As a point of departure, it embraces the idea that the SDGs are transformative in scope and

ambition, and that they have the potential to challenge some of the pervasive forces in education, which are detailed in the final section of this chapter. In concrete terms, the book aims to support the rights-based implementation of SDG 4 in its entirety. This places the fulfilment of the right to education at the centre of all efforts to realise SDG 4 and brings with it a dual focus on the extent to which rights-holders enjoy their rights and duty-bearers deliver on their obligations.¹

While the authors in this volume focus on different aspects of the broad education agenda, they share the value of advancing critical perspectives and rights-based approaches as part of the global conversation about SDG 4 implementation. Their analysis is firmly rooted in human rights and social justice. The chapters engage critically with SDG 4, examining its strengths and weaknesses, scrutinising the forces behind it and the challenges, tensions, and power dynamics shaping its implementation. With a decade left until the 2030 deadline, this book aims to inform, scrutinise, and create a sense of urgency. It encourages readers to contribute to ongoing deliberations and discussions, voice critical concerns, and think how best to advance rights-based perspectives. These inputs are integral to building capacity for implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the education goal.

This introductory chapter sets the scene for the deeper analysis found in subsequent chapters. It starts with a brief overview of the MDG/EFA era and introduces the so-called post-2015 process and the deliberations around the global education goal. It then presents the new priorities in education, as captured in the goal on quality education for all. It highlights two principal challenges related to the SDGs as a whole and the broader implementation architecture. The first challenge is the limited accountability provided by the global framework for monitoring progress toward the goals. The second is the financing architecture. It then zooms in on three areas of tension and contestation within the education space: First, I discuss the equity promise within the SDGs and its implications in a context of rising inequality. Second, I examine the changing roles of both the public and the private sectors in education, and what this means for progress toward SDG 4. Third, I highlight the conflicting quests for quality education and for measurable and globally comparable learning outcomes. With these tensions in mind, I introduce the structure of the book and its individual chapters.

1 A Brief History: Formulating a New Development Agenda

In retrospect, it is hard to believe that the question at the start of the so-called post-2015 process was whether there would be an education goal at all. At that

stage, there were two competing camps: Some were focused on the failure to meet the MDGs and were promoting a follow-up framework. Others had started advocating for a set of sustainable development goals in the lead-up to the United Nations (UN) Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012; that idea, which had been spearheaded by the Government of Colombia, was eventually included in the outcome document of the Conference (UNGA, 2012).

Several processes were initiated by the UN system in 2012 to inform the new development agenda, two of which in particular kickstarted the debate on what the world wanted and needed. First, the UN Secretary-General appointed a High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (HLP) to advise him on a new practical but bold agenda. The HLP organised several outreach meetings, which encouraged civil society organisations (CSOs) to formulate proposals and build alliances. Second, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) launched a Global Conversation, aimed at involving people across the globe in discussion of a new set of development priorities. Under the banner of *The World We Want*, they carried out global, thematic, regional, and national consultations, with some 10 million people voting on their priorities in the *My World Survey*. A 'good education' came out as the issue that mattered the most to people across the globe (UN, 2013a, p. 8). This process also included focussed thematic discussions, including one on education.

Concurrently, negotiations on sustainable development goals had started at the UN Headquarters in New York. An Open Working Group (OWG) had been established and tasked with developing a proposal for consideration by the UN General Assembly (UNGA, 2013). When the OWG started its work in early 2012, the connections with other post-2015 processes were unclear, and few outside the sustainable development community were involved. But it soon became apparent that the OWG negotiations included the post-MDG issues too. Moreover, the OWG process was open and inclusive, encouraging civil society and other stakeholders to get involved. By mid-2014, the OWG was broadly considered the main process for formulating a new development agenda. The OWG agreed on a final proposal in July 2014, encompassing 17 sustainable development goals and 169 associated targets. For more detail on the OWG process and negotiations, see Chapter 2.

The UN General Assembly decided that the OWG proposal was to be the basis for the new development agenda, while 'other inputs' also would be considered (UNGA, 2014). The Intergovernmental Negotiations on the Post-2015 Development Agenda commenced in January 2015, aiming for the adoption of a new framework in September of that year. In addition to goals and targets, the framework was to include a declaration and an architecture for follow-up, review, and financing.

1.1 *The Education Sector's Own Post-2015 Process: Third Time Lucky?*

Discussions in the education sector began from a different starting point, since international consensus around the EFA agenda had begun in 1990, when UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, and the World Bank convened the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand. That conference positioned education as a development priority and agreed on an 'expanded vision of basic education', captured in the World Declaration on Education for All (World Conference on Education for All, 1990). While progress was slower than expected, the broad EFA vision was further developed at the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, where six EFA goals as well as a Framework for Action were adopted, outlining strategies for implementation and transforming the agenda into something that was considered more actionable (World Education Forum, 2000).

Four months later, the UN General Assembly adopted the Millennium Declaration, pledging to eradicate extreme poverty through eight global goals. MDG 2 – the education goal – focused on universal primary education, while MDG 3 – the gender goal – was to achieve gender parity in both primary and secondary education. Within the international education community, it is commonly stated that the MDGs narrowed and skewed the EFA agenda by stealing away both attention and financing (UNESCO, 2013b). While the EFA movement was committed to a comprehensive vision of education, well beyond primary level, the MDGs focused almost exclusively on primary education. Given their overlapping ambitions, the two agendas brought about parallel but, to some extent, conflicting obligations, with member states asked to simultaneously deliver on different sets of implementation strategies and reporting duties.

As the 2015 deadline for the EFA goals was fast approaching, an extensive process was launched within the education sector to evaluate progress made and discuss new priorities and strategies. At its 2013 General Conference, UNESCO asserted its own role and that of the EFA coordination mechanisms in formulating the new education agenda, to be adopted by the World Education Forum in May 2015 and then 'embraced' by Heads of State and Government in September 2015 (UNESCO, 2013a, p. 9). The assumption was that the education sector would design and adopt the education goal to be included in the new development framework, and UNESCO proceeded accordingly.

The EFA architecture was well suited to extensive post-2015 consultation. UNESCO encouraged member states to evaluate their progress toward EFA, and more than 100 national EFA reviews formed the basis for six regional EFA 2015 Review Reports. The EFA Global Monitoring Reports 2013/14 and 2015 contributed further to a shared understanding of progress to date. The Global Education Meeting, held in Muscat, Oman, in May 2014, advanced the agenda-setting

through the adoption of the Muscat Agreement, which included a proposal for an education goal with seven targets (UNESCO, 2014a). Regional Ministerial Conferences evaluated progress toward EFA and identified key challenges and priorities for education beyond 2015 ahead of the World Education Forum, which was held in Incheon, South Korea, in May 2015. Civil society consultations were organised in connection with each regional meeting, further consolidating a common vision of the education sector. The EFA Steering Committee played an active role in this regard too (Sachs-Israel, 2016).

There was an expectation that member states working within the post-EFA process would also play a role as education ambassadors within the broader post-2015 processes. At Secretariat level, UNESCO and UNICEF led the education strand and regularly shared inputs through the UN Secretariat. They also coordinated the thematic track on education as part of the UN-led conversation on *The World We Want*, where a good education had emerged as the top priority. The thematic track included regional meetings, an online consultation, and a Global Thematic Consultation on Education in the Post-2015 Development Agenda held in March 2013 (UN, 2013a, p. 153).

However, the many parallel tracks of the post-2015 discussions meant that the prior separation between the MDG and EFA frameworks was being reproduced. To start with, there were two parallel follow-up processes: one related to the broader post-2015 development framework and another education-focused post-2015 process. This divided the education community: While some organisations were quick to support the notion of a single post-2015 agenda, others feared that any development agenda would be unable to reflect the breadth and depth of the EFA goals, and therefore considered a separate post-EFA agenda to be necessary. There was a considerable gap between the two processes, and many found the parallel tracks problematic (Yamada, 2016).

Many within the education sector maintain that the post-EFA process had considerable influence over the formulation of SDG 4, but the parallel nature of the processes limited the impact of the post-EFA movement by framing it as an 'input' among others, rather than recognising it as the legitimate voice of the education sector. While it had been impossible to foresee the exact nature of the post-2015 process, especially the central role of the OWG, the education sector should have been more present in the overall post-MDG process (see Chapter 2). This would have made education more visible in OWG debates and allowed for a more informed and critical debate on education priorities. Moreover, it would have empowered the education community and allowed for stronger synergies and cooperation across sectors, including a more critical and thoughtful reflection on the ways in which education has to change in order to foster sustainable development.

2 An Introduction to the New Agenda: The Sustainable Development Goals

Addressing challenges associated with social, economic, and environmental development, the 17 SDGs are ambitious, aspirational, and far-reaching – and an anomaly in a world where extensive intergovernmental agreement has become rare and policy objectives generally are expected to be evidence-based, reasonable, and measurable. The SDGs pledge to sort out the unfinished business of the MDGs – eradicating poverty and hunger, ensuring health and quality education, and achieving gender equality – as well as combatting climate change, protecting oceans and ecosystems, reducing inequality within and among countries, ensuring sustainable production and consumption, and promoting economic growth and decent work (see Table 1.1). They set out to transform the world by 2030, in part by asserting that sustainable development is a universal challenge, and thus a responsibility and obligation of all countries.

While this book considers education key to the success of Agenda 2030 as a whole and views the SDGs as interdependent, it zooms in on the education goal as an opportunity to make desperately needed progress on education.

3 Sustainable Development Goal 4

The education goal, SDG 4, adopted in September 2015 exceeded most expectations. The broad goal, ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’, is to be achieved through ten specific targets, including three so-called means of implementation targets (see Table 1.2). The implementation targets cover elements that are considered essential to have in place for overall progress toward the goal to be possible. They emerged as a consequence of the difficult negotiations over the financing of the agenda and call for financial as well as nonfinancial means of implementation under each goal. While the education goal and its targets were expected to go beyond the MDG promise of primary education and gender parity, SDG 4 goes beyond the scope of the EFA goals too. The most fundamental difference is the universal nature of the agenda: all countries in the world have committed to reaching these goals.

In practice, governments have committed to a shared level of ambition and set of priorities. Countries are expected to translate these into national policies and plans with specific targets, based on their contexts and their current state of education and lifelong learning. To facilitate this, UNESCO member states²

TABLE 1.1 The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Number	Goals
Goal 1.	End poverty in all its forms everywhere
Goal 2.	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
Goal 3.	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
Goal 4.	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
Goal 5.	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
Goal 6.	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
Goal 7.	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
Goal 8.	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
Goal 9.	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation
Goal 10.	Reduce inequality within and among countries
Goal 11.	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
Goal 12.	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
Goal 13.	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts ^a
Goal 14.	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
Goal 15.	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
Goal 16.	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
Goal 17.	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development

- a Acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change.

SOURCE: UNGA (2015b, p. 17)

adopted the Education 2030 Framework for Action (FFA) in November 2015 (WEF, 2015), following more than two years of consensus-building. It is a road-map to implementation, outlining values and principles as well as indicative strategies under each target, often specifying what is covered under each target and effectively making them more ambitious. It also provides guidance on some of the more controversial areas in education, such as private provision of education or the use of technology. Lastly, it outlines the architecture for monitoring and the set of thematic indicators. However, it is not clear to what extent governments respect the FFA, in part because there is no mechanism for monitoring and following up on its specific elements. The FFA is largely unknown outside the education sector, but one might also legitimately wonder whether it is sufficiently known within the sector and whether enough has been done to promote it.

I will not discuss each of the targets, but highlight some of their strengths and weaknesses, drawing upon the provisions within the FFA too. For the precise wording of each target, see Table 1.2.

What is not included in SDG 4 is almost as important as what is. The omission of early childhood education is glaring: Target 4.2 suggests that education starts at preprimary rather than early childhood level. Beyond the reference in the goal title, lifelong learning, and adult learning and education beyond literacy and numeracy are excluded (for further discussion on this, see Benavot, 2018a). Furthermore, there is no target on education financing, despite the broad consensus within the education community that the lack of adequate financing was a major obstacle to EFA progress.

3.1 *“Follow-up and Review” as Opposed to Accountability*

Agenda 2030 has two serious structural flaws: the weak accountability and reporting framework, and the absence of financing commitments. There is a striking gap between the level of ambition of the goals and targets, and that of the architecture supporting and monitoring their implementation. It appears that this is the price that had to be paid for the far-reaching and ambitious goals; the adoption of a ‘transformative’ agenda necessitated that there be no strings attached. The so-called ‘follow-up and review’ – member states refused the term accountability – is ‘voluntary and country-led, will take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development, and will respect policy space and priorities’ (UNGA, 2015b, paragraph 74.a). Monitoring at global level is based on an indicator framework and centred around the annual High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, where member states come together to review progress. All of it is voluntary.

TABLE 1.2 SDG 4 and its targets. Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Number Targets

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| 4.1 | By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes |
| 4.2 | By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education |
| 4.3 | By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university |
| 4.4 | By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship |
| 4.5 | By 2030, 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 |
| 4.6 | By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy |
| 4.7 | By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the 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 |
| 4.a | Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all |
| 4.b | By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries |
| 4.c | By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States |
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SOURCE: UNGA (2015b, p. 17)

A key component of this is the Voluntary National Review. As the name indicates, member states volunteer to review progress toward goals and targets, but also the processes, policies, and institutional mechanisms put in place to support implementation, including means of implementation and the involvement of civil society. By the end of 2019, 142 countries will have carried out voluntary national reviews. This exchange on progress as well as obstacles and challenges should allow countries to learn from each other, but is rendered difficult by the limited time available for in-depth discussion, the varying formats of the reviews presented, and the unwillingness of governments to criticise or directly challenge other governments. Given that the guidelines provided by the UN are voluntary too, countries choose what areas and aspects they review. Few reports thus far have included in-depth analysis or discussion of structural barriers; it is mostly low-income countries that have acknowledged challenges (Beisheim, 2018, p. 22). This undermines the universality of the agenda and risks reproducing hierarchies of development while ignoring systemic issues and dynamics of donor dependency. Civil society representatives tend to be the only ones asking difficult questions, and these are seldom answered.

Nevertheless, the reviews could still play an important role at the national level by pushing governments to think more holistically about the SDGs and to consider mechanisms for more effective cooperation across sectors and silos. Reviews so far have shown that a large number of countries – high- as well as low-income – have established new structures for coordination and oversight, often at the level of the government (UN DESA, 2018b). Similarly, regional structures have been established to support implementation and policy coordination.

Among the transformative elements of Agenda 2030 are its universality and its pledge to overcome silos within sustainable development. However, neither is enforced. Silos are maintained as goals are reviewed separately, and there is no framework for assessing synergies and antagonisms across goals. Beyond synergies, there is no link to rights-based monitoring efforts: despite 156 of the 169 targets having substantial linkages to human rights and labour standards, there is no effective integration of these in the review of the SDGs (Feiring & Hassler, 2016, p. 7).³ This also means that extraterritorial human rights obligations – that is, the duties of governments to respect, protect, and fulfil human rights beyond their borders (Lusiani & Muchhala, 2015) – are ignored. A rights-based review and reporting architecture should measure the enjoyment of the right to education by rights-holders as well as the degree of compliance with human rights obligations of states. Instead, governments can report on enrolment figures without addressing the provider of education, its quality, or the costs to households. In the same vein, donor countries can count support to private fee-charging

schools in recipient countries as part of its SDG implementation without having to report on its impact on communities and structures of inequality.

3.2 *Measuring and Monitoring Progress*

Accountability is further undermined by the fact that the indicators remain works in progress more than four years after the adoption of the SDGs. Member states relegated the global indicators to a technical concern and delegated their development to the UN Statistical Commission. They, in turn, established an intergovernmental expert group: the Inter-Agency Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs), charged with the daunting task of developing a single global indicator for each of the 169 targets.

But choosing what and how to measure is never neutral. As the result of political negotiations, many of the SDG targets are ambiguous and imprecise, which means that the technical task came with a de facto power to redefine the focus of targets (MacFeely, 2018). Driven by data availability and comparability as well as methodological feasibility rather than the purpose of the target, many indicators fail to measure the full scope of the target. The global indicator under Target 4.1, for instance, looks at minimum proficiency levels in numeracy and literacy as a proxy for effective and relevant learning outcomes, but fails to measure the completion of free quality primary and secondary education. There are numerous such examples (Unterhalter, 2019). This is worrying because the indicators are not simply a matter of holding governments to account but should also guide policy and help strengthen education systems.

As of April 2019, close to half of the global indicators are approved (UN, 2019). But the lack of data and conceptual and/or methodological clarity is undermining the monitoring of many goals, such as those on reducing inequality, combatting climate change, and ensuring peaceful and inclusive societies. Less than a third of the data needed to monitor progress on gender equality is available (UN Women, 2018). The greater emphasis on individual development and human rights, and the extensive disaggregation called for within Agenda 2030, are challenging for national statistical systems (MacFeely, 2018).

Indicators on which no progress has been made will be reconsidered in 2020. Additional indicators will be discussed for targets only partially covered by their indicator. While these two processes present an opportunity for better indicators, time is tight and country capacity limited. Many member states struggle with data collection, analysis, and reporting. Moreover, the average cost of all SDG 4 data has been estimated at approximately US\$1.35 million per country per year (UIS, 2018a), and SDG 4 is only one of the 17 SDGs. Furthermore, low-income countries may find themselves obliged to report on the

indicators as part of reporting to donors, adding another dimension to why it is so important to get these indicators right.

According to Agenda 2030, the global indicators are to be accompanied by regional and national indicators; with few exceptions, little progress has been made on these fronts. The education sector was ahead of the global game when proposing a set of thematic education indicators, which provides a more comprehensive viewpoint on progress in education than the 11 global indicators (UIS, 2015). It is also testament to the fact that indicators, while technical, are decidedly political and thus benefit from being discussed by stakeholders. However, the methodological progress made on the thematic education indicators has been uneven, with Target 4.7 standing out as the one with least progress.

3.3 *Financing Sustainable Development – Or Reimagining the Role of the State*

Despite the consensus within the EFA community on the necessity of a financing target, and the significant civil society mobilisation during the post-2015 process, the efforts to secure an explicit commitment to education financing failed. UNESCO tried to make up for this by mobilising support for financial commitments in the Education 2030 Framework for Action, passed in November 2015. In the end, the FFA restated an older agreement on education financing, while adjusting the level of ambition to ‘at least 4% to 6% of ... GDP’ and ‘at least 15% to 20% of public expenditure’ to education (WEF, 2015, p. 67). There is also an indicator on the proportion of total government spending on essential services (education, health, and social protection) under Target 1.a, on mobilising resources to end poverty.

During the SDG negotiations, the World Bank received a lot of attention for its claim that a shift from billions to trillions was necessary to achieve the SDGs, emphasising the need for private finance (World Bank, 2015a). This made for a discourse in which public responsibility and financing were framed as unfeasible and it was considered unreasonable to suggest that any government could do it on its own. Private sector participation was seen as a precondition for success, as reflected in Target 17.17, seeking ‘effective public, public-private, and civil society partnerships’ (UNGA, 2015b, p. 27). Blended finance and public-private partnerships (PPPs) were further championed in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (UNGA, 2015a).

The emphasis on the amount of money needed drove attention away from the politics around the sources of financing, framing it as a mere practical arrangement. The implication is that as long as education is provided, it does not matter who the provider is. Yet the SDGs depend on political priorities and

policies as much as on financing, and the sources of funding have direct consequences for the policy environment and the political architecture, including governance and the role of the state. The UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights recently rang the alarm bell and challenged the notion of privatisation as 'a technical solution for managing resources and reducing fiscal deficits' (UN, 2018a, p. 2). He suggested that stronger monitoring and accountability mechanisms will not be enough to mitigate the risks related to a renegotiated social contract. When private actors and organisations enter public spaces and domains of the government, there is a more ideological dynamic at play, where power is being renegotiated simply through the new role taken by the private sector and its implicit or explicit side-lining of the government. There is ample evidence pointing to the unequal sharing of risks in PPPs (see for instance Eurodad, 2018), but it is harder to evaluate the less tangible consequences of privatisation on issues such as equity and inclusion, poverty, social cohesion, or public support for taxation.

Agenda 2030 is not explicit in its articulation of the role of the state or the private sector. It simply calls on everybody to do their part. But suggesting that states and the private sector are equally important for the achievement of the SDGs is, in fact, a radical reimagining of the role of the state. One could argue that this would have been the case under the MDGs too. What has changed is the attribution of responsibility within the 2030 Agenda, the attitudes of donor nations, and the role that the private sector itself seeks to play. This new universal agenda comes with an expectation on countries to sort out their own financing, which means that many find themselves forced to look for alternative sources of funding. Moreover, public budgets are shrinking and cost-cutting efforts by governments can be observed across the globe. All of this results in a situation where the private sector is encouraged and facilitated to play a new and expanded role in public policy implementation.

3.4 *Transformation against a Capitalist Backdrop*

The SDGs set out to take two inherently incompatible ideological approaches: committing to continued economic growth while simultaneously respecting planetary boundaries and transforming the world. The collision between growth-fuelled capitalism and sustainable development is ignored, as the SDGs suggest that social, environmental, and economic goals can be reached independently from each other (Hickel, 2019). This lack of acknowledgement of the trade-offs between these competing aspirations confirms that there are strong economic and political interests at stake and suggests a lack of appreciation of the scale of the climate crisis and of the social and the environmental costs of business as usual.

The SDGs represent a tension between transformation and status quo. Adopted by the governments that were in power in 2015, the SDGs necessarily reflect the political climate and leanings of that time. Yet, there are strands that, if taken seriously, would challenge the disproportionate power and privileges of the elite. The goal on reducing inequality (SDG 10), for instance, is deeply progressive, considering the number of countries where high levels of income inequality are entrenched yet broadly accepted. The notion of reducing inequality between countries may be even more radical. It is, thus, both useful and important to remember the more progressive dimensions of the agenda and the values that underpin it. Such principles include the right to development, which, according to the 1992 *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, ‘must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations’ (UNGA, 1992, p. 1). Another principle is common but differentiated responsibilities, which acknowledges that responsibilities are based on historical differences in contributions to environmental problems and the (technical and economic) capacity to tackle these. Yet another principle deals with policy space, which guarantees the autonomy of countries in determining policies and managing their economies.

These principles are fundamental in an interconnected and interdependent but profoundly unequal world – and require active defending. Whereas the negotiations on the SDGs rejected the colonial logic of development, the goals are to be implemented in a world that still is shaped by colonial structures and acutely unequal access to resources. The notion of policy space is central to the monitoring of SDG progress too: How much autonomy do the poorest countries have in making sustainable development happen? What is an adequate response to many multinational companies having a turnover that is far bigger than the GDP of whole countries?

The MDGs were part of a shift by which development was simplified into more easily digested and measured objectives, ignoring the more ideological issue of how to meet the objectives. Under the broader umbrella of MDG implementation, there was first a shift toward harmonisation and greater alignment of priorities among donor countries, and then toward more of a partnership between donor and recipient countries, principally within the context of the aid effectiveness process. The MDG era brought with it a more results-based and impact-driven understanding of aid. By reducing development to a question of efficiency, one denies the complex nature of processes of development and posits the economic side as more important, implying there is one single way forward that is more rational, suitable, and expedient.

The shift to sustainable development, however, calls for a rethinking of current models of development. It overthrows the notion of a ‘developed country’

both in the sense of rejecting the traditional trajectory of growth-fuelled development and asserting that no single country has figured out a way of balancing social, economic, and environmental progress.

This obliges the education sector to take a critical look at itself: is education in its current form fit for this shift to sustainable development? Throughout the post-2015 process education advocates worked to frame education as the foundation for development (UNESCO, 2013a). While education is a precondition for achieving many other development goals, causality is complex and the transformative power of education is determined by countless factors. As discussed in Chapter 3, educating girls cannot be separated from other structures, and gender equality in and through education is intrinsically linked with societal norms and structures. The intended mainstreaming and fostering of interlinkages within SDG implementation are yet to be seen, but the education sector should engage more thoughtfully with these sought-after synergies: are we willing to rethink education to the extent needed for climate justice? How can education systems support students in reflecting on their role in society and in a world that is characterised by inequality, climate crisis and human rights violations?

4 Addressing the Challenges within SDG 4

As previously mentioned, the commitment to inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities within SDG 4 leaves room for different approaches, priorities, and even ideologies. The agenda calls on governments to 'sustain political leadership on education and guide the process of contextualising and implementing the SDG 4-Education 2030 goal and targets, based on national experiences and priorities' (WEF, 2015, p. 57). Such a contextualisation is a precondition for relevant, targeted, and appropriate implementation. But it also opens the door for inconsistencies and the neglect or outright undermining of dimensions of the goal. The UNESCO-driven Framework for Action aims to mitigate this by guiding the implementation, but there is little indication of it having become the normative instrument that it was designed to be. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the necessary localising of the agenda at national level and the cherry-picking within SDG 4 of some international organisations. The global education landscape is characterised by a competition for influence and authority, and the different mandates and ideological approaches of actors are naturally reflected in their respective SDG 4 efforts. Every initiative need not reflect the full scope of SDG 4, but neither can one assume that every education initiative automatically

contributes to the achievement of SDG 4. More scrutiny of proposed initiatives and implementation strategies is vital for a rights-based implementation.

In fact, there have been several education initiatives that have undermined SDG 4 in its entirety in the few years since its adoption. For example, despite having signed onto the FFA, the World Bank – the largest funder of education in low-income countries – has continued to champion a narrow ‘learning agenda’, peppered with occasional lip service to SDG 4. The recently launched Human Capital Index posits the measurement of learning outcomes as the most urgent education priority. Through its *Systems Approach for Better Education Results* (SABER), the Bank is further pushing national governments to adopt its policy priorities, which are largely contradictory to and completely disconnected from those recommended in the FFA. For instance, the Bank’s policy advice discourages governments from regulating education, setting standards for private schools, or limiting private actors and fees (Bous, 2019).

Beyond undermining the breadth of SDG 4, the Bank rejects SDG 4 and its FFA as the overarching global framework for education. As so-called knowledge-based economies grapple for growth and hunt for quick fixes and best practices in education, SDG 4 implementation is located at the heart of the tensions between an instrumentalist approach to education, where its value is determined by the economic growth that it yields, and a broader rights-based conceptualisation. Moreover, the SDGs are to be implemented in a political landscape where the UN system struggles to assert its relevance and values; UNESCO is no longer the obvious authority in education, and it is undermined by its financial situation too (Hüfner, 2017). As both the G7 and the G20 show a new interest in education, there is little to suggest that SDG 4 will be the framework for that conversation.

These differences continue to divide the education community and make implementation ever-more challenging, even if these tensions were not brought about by the SDGs as much as they simply were not resolved by the SDGs. Part of the tension derives from the fact that the 2030 Agenda does not specify the extent to which efforts have to be aligned, harmonised, or globally comparable. Several SDG targets refer to concepts within education for which there are no global standards. The most obvious example is learning outcomes and whether they should be aligned and compared at the global level. This issue should be addressed target by target, although in some cases, the global indicator framework has imposed a resolution of this dilemma that was invariably in support of convergence.

The idea for this book was born out of frustration over these divisions and particularly the misuse and misinterpretations of SDG 4 and the rejection of the FFA. The book argues that rights-based implementation of SDG 4 rests on

three pillars: equitable education systems, public provision and regulation of education, and a broad conception of quality. These pillars could also be conceived of as the axes against which the tensions and contradictions are playing out.

4.1 *Going beyond Equality: Ensuring Equitable Education Systems*

A consensus emerged early in the post-2015 process on the need to reach those who had been left behind by the progress made under the MDGs and EFA goals. The aspiration of leaving no one behind quickly became the slogan for the new agenda, but little was done to define what exactly this entailed. In fact, it translated into discussions over which groups to explicitly mention rather than the ways in which structural barriers could be addressed and removed. Some have suggested that the success of the SDGs should be measured in the reduction in differences between quintiles within countries rather than the traditional comparison between countries (Lewin, 2015).

SDG 4 has been celebrated for its commitment to the universal completion of free primary and secondary education, which goes beyond the human rights obligation of making secondary education *available* and *progressively free*. The FFA goes further by specifying that it should entail the ‘provision of 12 years of free, publicly funded, inclusive, equitable, quality primary and secondary education – of which at least nine years are compulsory’ (WEF, 2015, p. 7). During the MDG era (2000–2015), there was frustration in the education sector over the prioritisation of primary completion over all other education challenges. One of the demands going forward was for a more balanced development of the education system as a whole, where education is understood as a continuum, and all levels benefit from policy attention and investment. But such an expansion of education requires careful attention to equity, especially as the dynamics of exclusion may differ depending on the level of education. Whereas early childhood education is broadly considered vital for overcoming differences in backgrounds of children and thus contributing to more equitable and inclusive systems, Target 4.2 aims for equal access without addressing any of the associated barriers, such as the largely privatised sector and the high costs to households (the FFA does call for at least one year of free and compulsory preprimary education). Target 4.3, on the other hand, seeks to make technical, vocational, and tertiary education affordable, implying that equity is more urgent at the level of postsecondary education. Nevertheless, Target 4.b on higher education scholarships fails to acknowledge its inherent risks related to the reproduction of patterns of privilege and marginalisation; such scholarships risk discouraging the development of the higher education sector in recipient countries, while fostering brain drain.

With the number of out-of-school children of primary school age stalling for a tenth successive year in 2017, ensuring access remains urgent (UIS, 2018a). This suggests that the structures and mechanisms of exclusion and marginalisation are deeply rooted, complex, and context-specific. The reference to equitable and inclusive education in the goal itself implies a willingness to consider targeted and differentiated measures to ensure all groups enjoy an education of comparable quality and suggests a welcome departure from the parity principle of the MDGs. Target 4.a, on disability and gender sensitive education facilities, also brings in the notion that education systems in themselves have to change, which is an important complement to Target 4.5 on eliminating gender disparities and ensuring equal access for the vulnerable. The specific reference to persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples is significant, but the narrow focus of the target itself makes it insufficient (UNGA, 2017).

Unterhalter (2019) has criticised the failure of the SDG 4 indicators to consider equity beyond parity and equal provision, which will not account for the extent to which systems in themselves may reproduce inequalities. Many have argued for learning outcomes as a proxy for equity and inclusion in education, suggesting that this would entail a shift from equality of opportunity to equality of outcome (Omoeva, Moussa, & Hatch, 2018; Center for Universal Education, Save the Children and Women Thrive Worldwide, n.d.). But whereas learning assessments can help showcase disparities, they are also likely to reproduce patterns of inequality, for instance by favouring those who are learning in their mother tongue. Most current measurements of learning also exclude the out-of-school population. Rather than increasing the number of standardised assessments, equity requires more attention to processes of teaching and learning, and how equity can be fostered and ensured in the classroom. The references to *relevant* learning outcomes in Target 4.1 call for a broader and necessary discussion on the links between the content of education and equity and inclusion, such as the inclusion of indigenous knowledge or efforts to decolonise curriculum in postcolonial contexts. But thus far, such conversations have been undermined by a more utilitarian notion of relevance, as also reflected in the global indicator on literacy and numeracy.

4.2 *Protecting a Public Good from Private Profiteers*

The hard-fought and celebrated SDG 4 commitment to free primary and secondary education has coincided with an expansion of privately provided, fee-charging education. The target is not a statement of intent to reverse this trend; as highlighted earlier, the SDG framework stays strangely silent on the question of public services. In the case of education, negotiating member states ignored the evidence pointing to public provision and regulation of education

as keys to quality and equity in education. SDG 4 suggests that the provider and arrangements are irrelevant, provided all children are in school and learning.

Since the adoption of SDG 4, there has been an impressive mobilisation of trade unions and civil society organisations against privatisation and commercialisation of and in education, and especially profit-making in education (see, for instance, Education International's Global Response⁴ and the Privatisation in Education and Human Rights Consortium [Mangenot, Giannecchini, & Unsi, 2019]). Many of the private providers that have emerged in recent years are explicitly targeting poor communities, having identified a market where public services have been scarce and inadequate, public authorities largely absent, and parents anxious to secure a better future for their children. High-profile cases in Uganda (Riep and Machacek, 2016), Kenya (Education International and Kenya National Union of Teachers, 2016), and Liberia (Hook, 2017) have shown that national quality standards may be difficult to enforce in contexts with multiple and private providers of education. Moreover, they have shown that profit-making providers risk reproducing patterns of inequality by targeting different segments of society, offering a quality of education that matches the socioeconomic background of the students.

These developments are part of broader social and economic structures, which have opened up a market logic in education and a new role for the private sector (Verger, Lubienski, & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). Sustained fiscal austerity has resulted in education budgets being cut and put public authorities under pressure to be more cost-effective through, for example, the freezing of salaries of public sector workers, the hiring of less-qualified or unqualified teachers, the closing of public schools, the introduction of education voucher schemes, and the privatisation of schools and education support services. The sustained and structural underfunding of public systems has resulted in poorer quality and systems that are struggling to keep up with changing demands. The discourse of weak public education systems sits well with the emphasis on freedom of choice; in many contexts there is a growing demand for private alternatives, often characterised by a consumerist attitude to education. The ability to choose between schools may in itself symbolise progress, and many parents are prepared to sacrifice a lot to secure the future (economic) well-being of their children. As education becomes more accessible and broadly enjoyed, a backlash often emerges in which public opinion in favour of differentiation and choice in education gains strength. The notion of education as a public good is outweighed by one of education as self-progression and personal career enhancement, and a means for social differentiation.

The role of private actors in education is likely to remain a principal source of contention throughout the SDG era. While much of the attention thus far

has been on the role of the private sector, it has been estimated that 97% of the current financing gap will have to be solved through domestic resource mobilisation (International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, 2016). The SDGs call on countries to strengthen their domestic resource mobilisation and capacity to collect tax, which raises the importance of debating tax justice within the education sector too, as discussed by David Archer and Tanvir Muntasim in Chapter 8. This, together with the commitment to free primary and secondary education, should bring greater focus and policy consideration to household spending on education, including better data on this key indicator of the equity of education systems.

4.3 *A Narrow Implementation of the Broad Commitment of Quality*

The third tension characterising the implementation of SDG 4 is that between a broader notion of quality education and a narrow focus on specific learning outcomes. SDG 4 is often described as a goal for quality education, and its quality commitment cuts across the different targets. While the targets on safe learning environments (4.a) and qualified teachers (4.c) focus on the inputs required for quality education, many refer to the desired outcomes of education, such as relevant and effective learning outcomes in Target 4.1; the skills for employment, decent work, and entrepreneurship in Target 4.4; and the knowledge and skills needed for sustainable development in Target 4.7.

So far, implementation of this quality commitment has been characterised by a disproportionate focus on measurable learning outcomes, specifically literacy and numeracy. The attainment of literacy and numeracy is a core component of any education system but only part of what constitutes a quality education and of what is envisaged by SDG 4. Yet, other subjects and dimensions of quality are marginalised by the emphasis on the measurability and comparability of learning outcomes. Such dimensions include pedagogy and processes of teaching and learning, behavioural as well as social and emotional learning, creativity, critical thinking, sustainable development, human rights, and a sense of social justice.

Measurement in itself is not a solution to a lack of learning, but the adoption of SDG 4 coincided with a broader push for learning metrics and large-scale assessments. This push mirrors a policy shift that has taken place in national contexts across the globe, whereby the development of education systems is increasingly driven by processes of standardisation and 'datafication', and powerful private interests (Sellar & Hogan, 2019). Such reforms build on a number of assumptions: first, the assumption that education systems currently are expensive and ineffective; second, the assumption that processes of teaching and learning can be standardised, measured, and turned into data;

and third, the assumption that the data can be used to measure the efforts and performance of students, teachers, and systems as a whole, opening them up to simplified cost-benefit analyses. In the context of results-based financing, learning outcomes are emerging as the new metric for measuring progress in education – and future economic growth. This, in turn, suggests a direct link between globally comparable assessments and learning outcomes, on the one hand, and a globally competitive nation, on the other.

Such a disproportionate emphasis on a narrow set of data points pushes systems toward global convergence and denies the importance of contextually relevant education, the complexity of processes of teaching and learning, and the expertise and professional autonomy of teachers. It undermines the broader purposes of education and themes such as arts, culture, or sustainable development. Knowledge, skills, behaviours, attitudes, and values are integral components of a quality education, but they are not easily standardised or measured. An overemphasis on the learning outcomes of individuals also shifts the attention toward individual students and teachers. This is symptomatic of the tendency to ignore patterns of inequality and perceive problems through the narrow lens of the individual, suggesting that individual effort is enough to overcome systemic, structural barriers. Structural concerns and the responsibilities of duty-bearers remain essential for discussing and assessing the quality of education, including learning.

The overemphasis on measurable learning outcomes is reflected in the methodological progress made on SDG 4 indicators. The disproportionate focus on measuring learning outcomes, narrowly defined as literacy and numeracy in the global indicator for Target 4.1, has been driven by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, in part through the Global Alliance to Monitor Learning (GAML), which was established precisely to support the development of learning indicators and learning assessment methodologies for monitoring progress toward SDG 4 (UIS, 2017c). The same dynamic is reproduced in the financing of UIS, to which several donors have earmarked contributions specifically for measuring learning outcomes (UIS, 2017k, p. 23).

Paradoxically, the neglect of learning in the fields of human rights, climate change, and sustainable development has not been labelled a learning crisis. Progress on the indicators under Target 4.7 has been slow and underfunded compared to the abovementioned emphasis on numeracy and literacy. Yet, the quality commitment within SDG 4 should really be measured in the extent to which education systems deliver on Target 4.7 and ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed for sustainable development and climate justice. As discussed by Joel Westheimer in Chapter 13, there are lessons in citizenship in all classrooms, regardless of whether they are labelled as such.

School will inevitably shape notions of self in relation to society and the environment. Yet, the education community has been surprisingly slow to respond to calls for education for sustainable development (ESD) and climate change education. Moreover, in its current form, ESD is largely built around the cognitive side, at the expense of the behavioural as well as social and emotional learning, limiting its depth, impact and reach – and the transformative power of education.

Moving forward, education systems have to find ways of addressing not only the science but also the politics behind the climate crisis, ensuring that students reflect on its systemic nature and seek adequate responses. Curricula, teacher training, and teaching and learning materials urgently need to be revised so as to make schools into spaces for learning about and taking action for human rights, sustainable development, and climate justice.

5 An Overview of the Chapters

While the parameters of the new global education agenda were set once the agenda was adopted in 2015, the agenda is being remade as it is implemented nationally and locally. This book aims to inform and influence those deliberations. By bringing together different voices and perspectives – academics as well as civil society advocates – this book argues for a broader understanding of the new agenda and its implications. It aims to support and inform SDG 4 advocates and activism for the right to education more broadly. As more and more initiatives are framed as contributions to the achievement of SDG 4, and the pressure to demonstrate results is mounting, a critical and principled approach to SDG 4 becomes ever-more important. Given the weak accountability framework underpinning the SDGs, it will be up to social movements, including student and teacher unions and other civil society actors, to put pressure on governments and international organisations. Thus, many of the chapters examine how the SDGs map onto and support ongoing efforts and struggles in the education sector.

While viewing the education goal as an opportunity to advance the right to education, this book takes a critical standpoint. Many of the chapters caution against the unintended consequences of global goals, highlighting areas that are ill-suited for such quantification or global comparability. Others look at the limitations of the current education paradigm, questioning the extent to which progress can be made within its parameters. One of the main messages is that the SDGs and their implementation should be analysed, criticised, and debated. This book aims to support this critical conversation, help advance

rights-based perspectives, and build capacity for strengthened monitoring and critical analysis as implementation continues. It would not be possible to address all the dimensions of SDG 4 that deserve to be discussed in this volume. Both early childhood education as well as adult education and life-long learning are examples of areas that this book does not discuss explicitly. While the authors have drawn upon work and examples from a range of countries and contexts, not all regions of the world are equally represented in these chapters. I hope that this will encourage readers to contribute to the conversation.

In Chapter 2, 'The Twists and Turns in Negotiating a Global Education Goal: A Civil Society Perspective', I set the scene by providing a critical assessment of the process leading up to the adoption of SDG 4. The education goal was negotiated as one of 17 SDGs, and this is the first time this process is documented and analysed. Identifying areas of consensus, contention, and controversy, I argue that understanding these dynamics is key for strategically engaging with SDG 4 and its implementation.

The book is organised according to the above mentioned axes against which the tensions and contradictions are playing out, and the first set of chapters interrogates the new commitment to *equitable* and *inclusive* education. In Chapter 3, Naureen Durrani and Anjum Halai discuss gender equality within SDG 4. They argue that the failure to consider postcolonial contexts gives rise to a disconnect between the global aspirations of the SDGs and the national realities where they are to be implemented. Drawing on case studies from Pakistan, they caution against simplistic understandings of gender equality and particularly the power of girls' education, calling for more attention to gender *equity* and the interaction of education with social structures.

Christopher J. Johnstone, Matthew J. Schuelka, and Ghada Swadek discuss the explicit commitment to inclusive education within SDG 4 in Chapter 4. Noting that the SDGs do not provide a definition of inclusion, they explore conceptualisations of inclusion and specifically inclusive education. Drawing upon case studies in Bhutan and Morocco, they advance a rights-based understanding of inclusion that goes well beyond parity, highlighting some challenges and making recommendations.

Similarly, in Chapter 5, Lizzi O. Milligan, Zubeida Desai, and Carol Benson argue that equity must not be narrowly understood as a question of institutional access but broadened to include barriers such as language of instruction. Discussing its impact on access to knowledge and curricula as well as engagement in processes of teaching and learning, they argue that language of instruction is a key determinant of educational equity. Drawing on examples from their own work in South Africa, Rwanda, and Cambodia, they offer solutions for the future.

Stephanie Allais, Elaine Unterhalter, Palesa Molebatsi, Lerato Posholi and Colleen Howell discuss the implications of the target on equal access to higher education in their chapter. Examining this equity imperative against the backdrop of universities as historically elitist institutions, and a rise in enrolments that continues to be shaped by persistent inequalities, they propose a new approach to the 'public good' role of higher education, which challenges the individualist framing of higher education.

The second set of chapters looks at the respective roles of the state and the private sector in the implementation of SDG 4, including its financing. In Chapter 7, Alexandra Draxler examines the renewed aspiration within Target 4.1 to free and equitable primary and secondary education in light of concurrent threats and attacks on public education. In 'Education for All Open for Business? Public Goods versus Private Profits', she discusses the new role of the private sector in relation to three distinct but related areas: technology in education, standardisation and benchmarking of learning, as well as the expansion of for-profit education, and argues that the SDGs facilitate a greater influence of the private sector over public policy.

In Chapter 8, David Archer and Tanvir Muntasim analyse trends in education financing and the gradual shift from external aid under the EFA and MDG regimes to domestic resource mobilisation in the SDG era. They explore what this shift means for education and call on the education community to pay closer attention to taxation and tax justice. They highlight some of the limitations of current measures and tools used in advocacy for education financing and suggest a different framework for analysing public investment in education, looking not only at the amount of money spent on education but also on its equitable allocation.

The last set of chapters is devoted to the tensions surrounding the quest for quality education. In Chapter 9, Yusuf Sayed and Kate Moriarty argue that competing conceptions of quality, notably the tensions between instrumentalist and rights-based approaches to education, characterised the process of agreeing to the education goal, and they suggest that these tensions were not resolved through the adoption of the agenda; rather, the envisaged turn to quality is jeopardised by these competing conceptions of quality.

In Chapter 10, Stephanie Bengtsson, Mamusu Kamanda, Joanne Ailwood, and Bilal Barakat provide a critical analysis of the teacher target and indicators within SDG 4, and the extent to which they advance the broader goal of equitable and inclusive quality education. They problematise the framing of teachers as simply a resource for the education sector and argue that teachers must be recognised as stakeholders and rights-holders in education, urging the education community to rethink some of the measurement strategies for Target 4.c.

In Chapter 11, Aaron Benavot and William C. Smith examine ongoing efforts to establish and legitimise global learning metrics. Looking critically at the so-called learning crisis, they discuss intended and unintended consequences of learning metrics and the extent to which they can help realise the equity and quality promises of SDG 4.

In a similar vein, in Chapter 12, Clara Fontdevila argues that SDG 4 gives more prominence and legitimacy to large-scale assessments. Acknowledging that the measurement of learning outcomes is among the most controversial elements of the new education agenda, Fontdevila explores some of the actors in the increasing institutionalisation of large-scale assessments within the global education agenda.

In Chapter 13, Joel Westheimer looks at the degree of commitment to global citizenship education within Target 4.7. Asserting that schools teach lessons in citizenship whether it is part of the curriculum or not, he problematises prevailing notions of citizenship education, such as those that promote obedient citizens and aim at maintaining status quo. Building on these, Westheimer discusses how central our conceptions of citizenship, power and democracy are to the potential transformative role of the SDGs.

Whereas Westheimer hopes for transformation of the education provided, Hikaru Komatsu, Jeremy Rappleye, and Iveta Silova question whether more and better education is what is needed. In Chapter 14, they examine what they call the possible negative interaction between progress in education and the halting of the climate crisis, challenging the view advanced by the SDGs that expanding education will lead to transformation toward environmental sustainability.

The long-awaited incorporation of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in the global education agenda is the focus of Chapter 15. Stephanie Allais and Volker Wedekind critique the explicit, quantifiable targets associated with TVET and consider why that subsector is not easily amenable to international targets and why target-setting for TVET may have perverse or unintended consequences.

The book closes with two chapters that examine two central constituencies within the education community and their role in relation to SDG 4 efforts. Viktor Grønne and Luke Shore take as their point of departure in Chapter 16 that students are a central constituency in education and thus have a legitimate claim to be heard in debates about the future of education. They assess the role that the student movement played in defining the new education agenda, analyse the obstacles that emerged, and make recommendations about the representation of students as SDG 4 implementation gets underway.

In Chapter 17, Allyson Krupar and Anjela Taneja look at the efforts of civil society organisations to monitor the implementation of the SDGs, with a focus

on the rights-based monitoring of SDG 4. They discuss the opportunities provided by the global SDG framework for national-level action, challenges arising from its weak accountability mechanisms, and unique contributions that civil society can make to effective monitoring of progress.

In conclusion, as the implementation of SDG 4 gets underway and an ever-growing number of actors and initiatives allegedly contribute to its achievement, it is becoming clear that the ambitious but broad priorities are vulnerable to cherry-picking and misrepresentation. The combination of a lack of accountability and the necessity of localising the agenda risks undermining a rights-based approach to SDG 4 and the broader defence of quality public education. As the first volume that examines early implementation efforts under SDG 4, this book calls upon the education community to engage in a more critical and thoughtful way with SDG 4 and related efforts.

Notes

- 1 For a detailed exploration of the meaning of the right to education, see the website of the Right to Education Initiative (<https://www.right-to-education.org>).
- 2 Three members of UNESCO are not members of the UN: Cook Islands, Niue, and Palestine. Israel, Liechtenstein, and the United States are members of the UN but not of UNESCO.
- 3 A noteworthy initiative to overcome this divide is the Danish Institute for Human Rights' *SDG-Human Rights Data Explorer*, a searchable database that links monitoring information from the international human rights system to the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda: <https://sdgdata.humanrights.dk>.
- 4 <https://unite4education.org/>