

Three milestones for implementation of the Education 2030 Agenda

Christophe DECONINCK



Christophe DECONINCK, education policy expert
deconinck@gmail.com

Approximately 10 million people have so far completed the My World¹ survey, which lists a series of priorities and asks: “Which of these are most important for you and your family?” Education comes out on top in every region of the world, across all age groups and in all income categories. As the world’s population reaches record levels, the survey reflects a positive global shift in education.



1. <http://data.myworld2015.org/>. Consulted on 24 April 2016.

.../... Access to education has improved to such an extent that the system has managed to cope with population growth (31 million extra children between 1999 and 2010) and a higher percentage of children are now enrolled in primary education, with less developed countries progressively catching up with international standards (Boussichas, Coudert & Gillot). This is particularly true of countries that lagged the furthest behind: in Burundi, for example, the net enrolment ratio increased from 41% to 94% in 10 years. There are also two other important factors at play. Firstly, the global primary education retention rate has remained stable, at around 75%, since 1999. Secondly, this has led to a substantial increase in access to post-primary education in many countries. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, there was a 9 percentage point rise in the primary-to-secondary transition rate between 1999 and 2012. Although the goal of achieving universal primary education was not met in 2015, most countries came close to this target.²

Digging deeper into the education survey results also reveals the extent of social expectations. Despite significant progress, there are still huge numbers of children not enrolled in school, often amongst marginalised populations with limited access to basic services. Moreover, these progresses have been offset by low quality education or the lack of opportunities to access post-primary education. Education systems suffer from crises and under-funding and find it difficult to adapt to social and global changes. Against this backdrop of progress and shortcomings, people aspire to better education.

In the era of the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), what changes can we expect to see between now and 2030? In all likelihood, the same challenges will remain! Population growth will continue unabated in many parts

of the world, especially in low-income countries (LICs)³ where the school-age population could rise by more than 50%.⁴ The real challenge, however, is to improve both access and quality. SDG 4 places the emphasis on quality of education and on the importance of delivering educational services to the most marginalised populations. Whilst this is nothing new in itself, it reflects an ambition to better balance out efforts between increasing access and improving quality. Achieving equitable education remains a huge challenge — one that can only be addressed by improving both the quantity and quality of educational provision. The scale of this challenge is reflected in a key statistic: 250 million primary-age children fail to learn the basics. This estimated figure includes both children who have stopped attending school before grade 4, and those who lack the basic knowledge that could be expected of a child who has completed primary education.

This paper sets out some of the milestones that will need to be reached for successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda, namely: measuring learning outcomes; developing a body of high-quality teaching staff; and obtaining universal access to education by addressing vulnerabilities. By measuring learning outcomes, we should get a better picture of the general trajectory of the education system. By developing the teaching profession, we will focus much-needed attention on what happens in the classroom. And by working towards genuinely universal access, we will better understand the multi-faceted nature of inequality and exclusion in education systems. If we are to achieve SDG 4, we will need to make progress on these three fronts simultaneously.

2. According to the adjusted net enrolment rate and the primary completion rate, for example (GMR 2015). UNESCO projections indicate, however, that only a little over half of the 140 countries for which figures are available achieved universal primary education in 2015.

3. The UN population statistics reveal that in 2000-2015, the number of children aged 5-19 increased by 11% in lower-middle-income countries (L-MICs) and by 47% in LICs. Forecasts for 2015-2030 reveal figures that are only slightly lower (+8% and +35% respectively).

4. Angola, Burundi, Gambia, Mali, Niger, DRC and Tanzania, according to UN population figures.

► 1. Measuring quality and learning outcomes

There is a widely-held view that the progress achieved to date in terms of access (i.e. having more than 90% of the world's children enrolled in primary education) has been detrimental to education quality. Whilst it is possible to improve both access and quality simultaneously (2015 EFA Global Monitoring Report), many countries have failed to do so. A comparative study of 29 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa shows that quality has dropped, or remained at low levels, in a number of countries. With or without empirical data, there is a general feeling that learning outcomes remain well below minimum expected standards.

Determinants of quality education.

There is no single, universal definition of “quality” and we will not attempt to address this question in detail here. What we can say, however, is that educational quality is determined by a range of different factors and most definitions encompass the following elements: qualified, trained and motivated teachers; an adequate learning environment where children are protected from violence; an appropriate curriculum; access to teaching materials; a well-managed school; teaching methods that are suited to the pupils; the maximum possible effective instruction time; reasonable class sizes; and regular assessment mechanisms. The language of instruction is often critically important to learning outcomes in early years education. Outside the school environment, the socio-economic backgrounds of children and their families also have a marked influence on their educational success. One way to measure educational quality in a manner that encompasses all of these determining factors is to focus on the ultimate goal, i.e. what pupils learn. Measuring learning outcomes is therefore one of the most common proxy measure for assessing educational quality.

Learning outcome assessment tools.

At present, the three most common skills measured to assess educational quality are reading, writing and numeracy, i.e. the fundamental learning outcomes. Children can only acquire other learning outcomes if they are able to read, hence why the early years of education are so vital to pupils' future schooling.

It is within this context that learning outcomes have reached political debates. The PISA survey⁵ in Europe is a case in point. Some international assessments focus on a specific subject (such as TIMSS for mathematics or PIRLS for reading) or on a particular age or level of education (EGRA and EGMA for primary early years). In some parts of the world, there are regional and multi-country assessments that produce more contextualised, comparative data (such as PASEC, SACMEQ and LLECE). In addition to those assessments that can be used for comparative purposes, governments also carry out their own national learning assessments in an effort to improve educational policy and teaching practices. Some countries, such as India, Pakistan, Mali and Senegal, have a growing tradition of community- or citizen-led assessments. Interestingly, these assessments encompass children who have dropped out of school and are carried out at home rather than in educational settings, thereby producing contextual socio-economic data.

Is there a learning crisis?

The 2014 PASEC survey measured reading and numeracy skills across 10 French-speaking countries in Africa.⁶ It found that around 60% of pupils fail to attain “sufficient”⁷ performance

5. PISA, and the other assessments mentioned here, tend to be known by their acronyms. See list of acronyms

6. Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Senegal, Chad and Togo.

7. PASEC sets a “sufficient” threshold for each level and subject. Page 28 of the report states that “[t]he thresholds are defined on the basis of the concepts assessed in the PASEC tests and according to the priority goals of school curricula in language-reading and mathematics, at the beginning and the end of the primary cycle”. The types of competencies expected at each level are set out in a series of tables.

Source: PASEC (2015). PASEC2014 – Education system performance in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa: competencies and learning factors in primary education, PASEC, CONFEMEN, Dakar.

in these two skills at the end of primary school. Moreover, these shortcomings are also in evidence in early years of education,⁸ with more than 70% of pupils failing to make the “sufficient” grade in reading and around 50% in mathematics.

The 2012 PISA survey points to a difference of around 120 points⁹ between those countries at the bottom of the rankings (Qatar, Indonesia and Peru) and the OECD average (equivalent to approximately three years of formal education). In Indonesia, more than 75% of pupils perform below the PISA minimum competency level in mathematics (compared with 23% amongst OECD countries).

As well as pointing to disparities between countries, these international and regional assessments also highlight inequalities within education systems. The detail reveals, for example, that the French education system produces inequality via a three-phase process. Firstly, there is a strong correlation between socio-economic background and school performance: “a one-unit increase in a pupil’s PISA index of economic, social and cultural status increases mathematics attainment by [...] 57 points” (compared with an OECD average of 39 points). Secondly, this phenomenon is worsening over time (43 points in 2003 and 55 points in 2006). Thirdly, the percentage of pupils struggling in mathematics and reading comprehension has risen steadily since 2003, and children from immigrant backgrounds are twice as likely as other pupils to fall behind.

These internal disparities can be found in many other countries, such as Morocco. Despite improvements in the enrolment rate, the 2011 PIRLS survey found that 78% of children from the wealthiest backgrounds had basic reading skills in line with international standards, compared with just 36% of pupils from the poorest quintile.¹⁰

8. The PASEC survey defines the “beginning of the primary cycle” as the second year of primary school – in most cases, when pupils are aged 7 or 8.

9. The PISA performance scale is designed to produce an average of 500 points, with a standard deviation of 100 points.

10. World Inequality Database on Education, UNESCO, EFA Global Monitoring Report: <http://www.education-inequalities.org/>.

The statistics therefore suggest a pressing need to rebalance education systems in a manner that looks beyond average outcomes and competencies. These assessments reveal a systemic learning crisis, driven in part by inequalities within education systems. This is just one example of the sheer volume of data produced by these surveys, which poses one of the key challenges of the 2030 Agenda – to turn these raw figures into usable information, then analyses, to be used as a scientific basis to inform education policy-making.

The limitations of measuring learning outcomes.

It is important to note, at this stage, that measuring learning outcomes is by nature a limited exercise because it does not encompass all dimensions of quality education. Does the school prepare its pupils for the world of work? Does it foster citizenship? Does it promote harmonious development or does it contribute to future societal divisions? There are many more questions of this nature – all of which need to be measured. SDG 4 makes a direct reference to citizenship, implying that measurement must look at more than learning outcomes alone. In other words, measuring educational quality is necessarily a multi-faceted process. Yet ultimately, in many situations, the most important thing to know is whether a school is fulfilling its primary purpose: to teach children the basic skills they need.

▶ 2. Developing and supporting a body of qualified teaching staff

Although politicians across the globe express the wish to build a knowledge society, there are simply not enough people to pass on this knowledge. Many countries face a dire shortage of teachers and the projections do not make good reading. According to UNESCO, the world will need an extra 3 million teachers between now and 2030 if universal primary education is to become a reality. Moreover, 22 million cur-

rently practising teachers will need to be replaced within the same time frame.

Quantity vs. quality: the dilemma facing education policy-makers.

In the quest for quality education, teacher policy is one of the most difficult balancing acts to deal with. In their pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), many countries have seen a dramatic rise in enrolment numbers, which, in return, caused greater demand for teachers, especially in rural areas. Although this situation placed further pressure on governments' expenditures, most countries have nevertheless coped with this challenge. According to UNESCO figures, even LICs have managed to double their primary school population and reduce their pupil-teacher ratio by 5%. However, the ratio is still far too high in many countries and there are significant regional disparities. More importantly, the gap has largely been plugged by contractual teaching staff. This trend has developed for a number of reasons: contractual teachers are paid less than permanent classroom teachers, are often recruited from and employed in their rural communities, and might be more motivated than permanent teachers (in some cases). For these reasons, they have been seen as a quick solution fit for the task – a solution promoted by international donors.

Increasingly, research shows that this policy has been detrimental to education quality. Many teachers receive no formal training or, at best, a short course of just a few weeks before being put to work in areas where they receive no teaching support. In some countries, qualified teachers form the minority of the workforce and are vastly outnumbered by their unqualified counterparts. For example, qualified teachers account for just 17% of the total workforce in Madagascar¹¹, less than 50% in Niger¹², and around 15% in Haiti. These observations show

how education system management can impact on teaching quality. Whilst the recruitment of contractual or community teaching staff is seen as a way to make rapid progress towards universal education, this policy poses major challenges in terms of their competencies. Many teachers lack key skills when it comes to subject knowledge, teaching methods, classroom management and language abilities. Examples of primary school teachers in Kenya, Uganda and Senegal preparing pupils for exams that they, themselves, cannot pass are probably more than anecdotal evidence.¹³

“The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.”

It goes without saying that teacher quality has a major impact on pupil performance – a fact backed by a substantial body of research. To accept this fact is to recognise that, ultimately, learning is about a classroom partnership between teacher and pupils. Teacher quality is a necessary but not sufficient factor of education quality. This observation was neatly summed up by a Korean official, who is reported to have said: “the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers”.

Research has therefore sought to ascertain what conditions are required for teachers to have a positive impact on pupil performance. The evidence shows that, where teachers are well-qualified, have completed initial training, benefit from continuous professional development, receive support early in their careers and work with peers, they can have a demonstrable effect on pupil success. Current research – especially in OECD countries – increasingly tends to focus on the role of behaviours and attitudes, placing a premium on factors such as teacher motivation, belief in pupils' abilities, and educa-

11. UNESCO Institute for Statistics database, Percentage of trained teachers by teaching level of education, 2014.

12. UNESCO Institute for Statistics database, Percentage of trained teachers by teaching level of education, 2014.

13. Also see the World Bank's Service Delivery Indicators for these countries, which measure the extent to which teachers master the core competencies taught in the fourth year of primary school. In Kenya, for example, only 39.4% of teachers assessed had the minimum subject knowledge in 2012. In Uganda, the same figure stood at 19.5% in 2013.

tional practices and methods.

The need for a systemic approach to teacher policies.

So far, we have looked at the two most visible factors that affect teacher quality: ongoing financial restrictions and the need – despite limited funding – to produce high-quality professional teachers. Yet long-term change will only come about if teacher training programmes actually translate into a change of pedagogical practices in the classroom.

In order to raise teaching standards, policy-makers therefore need to look at the education system as a whole: how to make teaching a more attractive profession,¹⁴ how to recruit and retain teachers, how best to deploy available resources, how to manage careers and professional development, how to provide continuous professional development and the support that teachers need throughout their career. These factors are often at the mercy of political economy factors and inadequate management. Policy-makers will need to ensure that the system as a whole, and its constituent levels, are managed in such a way that new competencies are able to emerge. In other words, in a reversal of the postulate given above, the quality of a teacher cannot exceed the quality of the education system. If the system itself is inadequate, this will have a detrimental effect on teacher performance – regardless of teacher quality.

▶ 3. Exclusion and discriminatory education systems

Worldwide, there are still 124 million out-of-school children between the age of 6 and 15 years, corresponding to 1 in 11 children of primary school age and 1 in 6 teenagers of lower-secondary school age. Other figures reveal the sheer scale of the task ahead: 19 countries have

14. We do not address the issue of teachers' pay here. In our view, this reflects a wider issue about the attractiveness of teaching as a profession and must necessarily be linked to teacher qualification.

500,000 or more children who are not enrolled in school, posing a major challenge in terms of school exclusion.

In terms of backgrounds, children excluded from the education system tend to fall into two categories: those living in conflict-affected areas and those from population groups that are traditionally marginalised in their country. This observation reflects two major underlying trends: the proliferation of crises around the world and the persistence of structurally discriminatory education systems. Both of these trends raise many similar questions about how best to respond. The key challenge underpinning the 2030 Agenda is therefore to reduce the number of excluded children and, at the same time, to transform education systems such that they no longer produce inequalities – particularly in terms of learning outcomes and employment prospects – in the name of extending access to education.

More crises leaving more children excluded from school.

Humanitarian crises are rising at such a rapid rate that attentions are now shifting onto the next episode before existing crises have been resolved. The reality is that crises tend to last longer and take root in regions with high refugee populations.¹⁵ There is a very real risk of lost generations in many parts of the world, such as in Syria, South Sudan, and some parts of Nigeria, Somalia, Mali and the Central African Republic. The 2015 EFA Global Monitoring Report found that 36% of the world's out-of-school children live in conflict-affected countries. UNESCO figures on the Syrian conflict show that, at the end of 2013, there were 1.8 million children aged 6-15 not enrolled in school. The impact of these crises spills over into neighbouring countries, where millions of people seek refuge. There are currently thousands of Syrian children in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey who are struggling to

15. The average displacement period stands at 17 years. Source: UNHCR.

receive an education in refugee camps or who place a significant burden on education systems in their host countries (double-shift schooling, extra costs, etc.).

Despite this, education is not a top priority for humanitarian action because, as the argument goes, it does not “save lives”. In fact, only 2% of humanitarian aid goes to education. In recent years, there has been a sustained civil society campaign to get education the attention it deserves, on the basis that it gives people fleeing conflict a sense of normality in their lives and has positive knock-on effects in other areas such as health and child protection and even, more generally, as a step towards peace-building.

A global response to education in crisis-affected countries?

As advocacy for education grows, there is mounting political pressure to address shortcomings in educational provision in emergencies. At the Oslo Summit on Education in July 2015, a plan was put forward to create a new “dedicated fund or a new modality for education in emergencies”. The fund, named Education Cannot Wait, was formally launched at the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016. Importantly, this initiative shines the spotlight on an area where the international community has been found wanting. Yet this new proposal is not without its criticisms. Is the creation of a new “vertical” fund the most appropriate solution to address a lack of funding, aid coordination problems, and the underlying reasons why displaced children still find it difficult to access education even after many years?

Looking beyond crises: multi-faceted structural inequalities.

Exclusion from the education system is an issue in every country in the world when it comes to structural inequalities. These inequalities lie at the heart of the new Sustainable Development Goals. Under the MDGs, a focus has been put on inequalities affecting girls. Gender inequality

remains an issue, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, where girls have a significant disadvantage. Yet boys are also affected, albeit more rarely, in parts of Asia and Central and South America, and in terms of access to secondary education.

Nevertheless, forms of inequality extend far beyond gender and there are numerous exclusion binaries: inequalities in access between urban and rural areas, inequalities between regions and between ethnic and religious minorities and, first and foremost, socio-economic inequalities. In some cases, the urban/rural divide may arise due to differences in resource allocation (particularly in terms of qualified teachers, who are scarcer in rural areas), yet this divide may also reflect poverty. In Mozambique, for example, boys are 1.4 times more likely to complete primary school than girls, children living in urban areas are 2.7 times more likely to do so than those living in rural areas, residents of Maputo are 3.3 times more likely to do so than those living in Zambezia, and children from families in the wealthiest quintile are 6.5 times more likely to complete primary school than those from the poorest quintile.¹⁶

In many cases, these exclusion factors have a cumulative effect, thereby further reducing educational opportunities and affecting learning outcomes. Looking again at the PIRLS results for Morocco, the figures show that only 20% of boys from poor rural areas acquire basic reading skills, compared with 86% of girls from wealthy urban backgrounds.

Creating a fairer education system at all levels.

This diverse array of situations can lead to cases where state educational provision is out of sync with public demand. This tension has an effect on various elements of the education system, such as language of instruction, curricula and timetabling. The rapid expansion of Quranic schools in the Sahel can also be interpreted as

¹⁶ Demographic and Health Survey 2011, accessed from the WIDE database.

a response to an unmet educational demand.¹⁷ This disconnect between supply and demand places a burden on social structures and hampers progress towards social cohesion targets. In the long term, a poorly educated population not only creates an economic deficit but also weakens social structures.

Moreover, any attempt to iron out inequalities has practical implications at every level of an education system – supporting struggling learners in the classroom, preventing pupils from disengaging with their education, helping lower-performing schools both locally and at the national level, etc.

Because inequalities are, by nature, rooted in their context, there is a need to study in greater depth how education produces or reproduces socio-economic inequalities. Winthrop and Matsui (Brookings, 2013) point to a growing body of research that shows a positive correlation between a country's stability and its educational provision, particularly when there is an increase in the secondary completion rate amongst boys. This link between State-building and stability on the one hand and education on the other is a two-way street, in the sense that the education system can reinforce inequality and social tension. Once again, this shows the multi-faceted nature of inequalities and how these are reflected not just in access and learning outcome statistics. Instead, inequalities can spread throughout an entire education system through factors such as curricula, unfair management decisions, teaching practices that perpetuate stereotypes, and the reproduction of elites through the school system.

► Conclusion

This overview of educational challenges – in terms of quality and equality – paves the way for a definition of “educational vulnerability”. A vulnerable education system is one in which

children do not learn and that causes exclusion – first, educational exclusion and second, social and economic exclusion.

There are clear milestones for future education policy-making when it comes to both equality and quality. A deeper analysis reveals a need for policy-makers to embrace a systemic approach and seek for sustained progress on all fronts simultaneously. The need to strengthen education systems also raises some interesting research questions, such as how to better measure learning outcomes and, more generally, how to assess the determining factors of quality education for all and the facets of educational vulnerability.

Although the education community shares this view, there is a need for new funding mechanisms to improve implementation, especially given the lack of international consensus on this matter. Education is under-funded¹⁸ and, too often, education budgets are not spent effectively.¹⁹ These two apparently opposing assertions are not, in fact, mutually exclusive. The Education 2030 Agenda demands a rethink of funding strategies, given that national governments, private funders and international donors are increasingly difficult to coordinate. Further research is needed to ascertain how the growth of low-fee private schools is driving fragmentation of the sector and, in turn, impacting quality, equality and the education system as a whole.

17. *Linking security and development: a plea for the Sahel*, Ferdi 2016. See pages 32 and 64-66 in particular.

18. According to UNESCO, USD 39bn will be needed each year between 2015 and 2030 to achieve quality early childhood, primary and secondary education in LICs and L-MICs.

19. There are numerous examples of country-level studies and analyses (Public Expenditure Reviews and Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys) that point to factors such as a disconnect between increased budgets and educational outcomes, excessively high unit costs, financial losses caused by absenteeism, and waste in the spending chain between the central level and individual schools.

▶ Acronyms

- PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment;
- TIMSS: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study;
- PIRLS: Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study;
- EGRA: Early Grade Reading Assessment;
- EGMA: Early Grade Mathematics Assessment;
- PASEC: *Programme d'Analyse des Systèmes Educatifs de la CONFEMEN* [CONFEMEN Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems].
- SACMEQ: Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality;
- LLECE: *Laboratorio Latinoamericano de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación* Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education].
- ASER: Annual Status of Education Report.

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Contact

www.ferdi.fr

contact@ferdi.fr

+33 (0)4 73 17 75 30

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