



# The Role of Education in Enabling the Sustainable Development Agenda

*Extracts of the homonymous book by S.E.L. Bengtsson, B. Barakat, and R. Muttarak*

## Introduction

Today, the SDGs remain a somewhat incoherent set of goals and targets with a number of overlaps and contradictions. The goals are also quite different in nature, with some of them - such as 'good health' - being seen as ends in themselves; and others - like 'clean water' - as a means to other ends. It is also evident that in practice not all 169 targets will get equal attention or equal funding.

In education, SDGs articulate a broader vision that includes not only access but also quality, equity, inclusion and lifelong learning. International policy and programming in education and development have tended to prioritise formal schooling for children aged 5-18, with an emphasis on primary education; the SDGs have shifted this perspective, addressing the scope of education as a whole moving from 'the right to basic education' to 'the right to lifelong learning'.

While it is widely understood that there is a positive relationship between education and other dimensions of development, and while populations around the world show a clear desire for more and better education, education remains an under-financed and under-prioritised sector within development and simultaneously over-emphasised in its role as a *tool* or instrument for development. For instance, discussions of 'capacity-building within the health sector fail to acknowledge that such activity is about teaching and learning, and must first and foremost succeed in its educational terms in order to meet its health objectives.

The book challenges silos thinking by exploring how achieving the SDG education target can be expected to support (or hinder) progress towards other targets. In fact, *good education functions as an enabling right*. In fact, the cognitive empowerment that tends to come along with education is, in a way, the key and root cause of many of the other desirable developments that are addressed in the SDGs. Because of this, the enabling effect of education for all is a necessary, albeit not always sufficient, pre-requisite for most of the other dimensions of sustainable development.

We need to overcome the artificial dichotomy between the so-called **intrinsic and instrumental value of education**, a dichotomy often emphasised within the education research community (though largely ignored by the development research community). The case for pursuing education *per se* is strengthened when seriously taking into account the wide range of instrumental benefits achievable.

Unlike income, there does not seem to be saturation of education.

Most of the international development assistance today still has a post-colonial power gradient in which Western technocrats determine what should happen without considering local preferences and needs; some even say that it has caused more harm than good. Andre Gunder Frank, the father of dependency theory, argued that the First World still exploits the Third World for its own

development. Wallerstein, adopting a Marxist viewpoint, holds that dominant development approaches are neo-colonial in nature.

Education investments work slowly, but almost always surely.

The processes of learning and teaching are a natural and defining characteristics of human society. The book adopts a holistic understanding of education by stating that putting education at the centre of the analysis means putting people at the centre of it. This holistic view also means to nuance the difference between formal and non-formal education, and adopt four pillars of learning:

- Learning to know
- Learning to do
- Learning to be
- Learning to live together

*“Between a social foundation that protects against critical human deprivations and an environmental ceiling that avoids critical natural thresholds, lies a safe and just space for humanity. This is the space where both human well-being and planetary well-being are assured, and their interdependence respected.” [Raworth]*

Education is both an end, a goal in itself, but also a means through which other goals are to be met. Part of reducing inequalities *is* to reduce inequalities in education; part of reducing poverty *is* to equip people with the skills for more productive livelihoods. Here education has a fundamental or **foundational capacity**.

*“There may not be formal schools in paradise, but we expect there would still be people wanting to learn.”*

Education demonstrably changes how we tend to think and act and it would be absurd to deny that such changes in attitudes and behaviours can have real consequences that matter for development.

**Good education** = education that has high intrinsic and consequently high instrumental value and that in terms of positional value does not give certain individuals unfair advantages over others.

Pursuing education on its own terms, for its intrinsic value, is actually the most promising way to reap the instrumental benefits across a wide range of outcomes.

## People

### Enabling physical, mental and socioemotional wellbeing

Research has shown that high-quality early-childhood education and care services have very high rates of return, particularly for the most disadvantaged.

Undernutrition has been identified as one of the key reasons that there are 130 million children in school who are failing to learn the basics of numeracy and literacy.

Investing in the education of girls and women has positive impacts on the overall health and wellbeing of communities; women with higher educational attainment generally have fewer children, and their children are likely to be healthier.

One of the key roles of education is building health literacy among both children and adults. Health literacy is defined as “functional literacy which focuses on the skills adults need in order to make use of health resources, make health decisions and take actions for their own and for their families’ well-being”.

There is a symbiotic yet complex relationship between education and the sectors of health, nutrition, well-being. However, in the current development discourse, this relationship is often painted as one-sided, with these sectors addressing the most basic needs presented as ‘building blocks’ for the higher-order sectors (including education). A holistic approach argues otherwise.

*“Students should be learning how to think, not what to think”*

## **Planet**

### **Ensuring environmental sustainability and equity**

The role of education in enhancing environmental sustainability and vulnerability reduction is a recent research area. With the exception of Target 4.7, the SDGs remain largely silent on the matter.

At the individual level, barriers to the adoption of mitigation or climate-aware actions and measures include a lack of awareness and understanding of the dynamics around climate change. Education potentially helps to lower all of these barriers, thereby contributing both to the promotion of a sustainable lifestyle and consumption and to the reduction of vulnerability. The cognition associated with education tends to improve risk-assessment and decision-making skills. Typically, higher socioeconomic status and access to resources also allow the more educated to act on this knowledge.

The main barrier to a greater energy economy is not technological, nor even economic, but plainly a lack of knowledge.

A whole-school approach calls for holistic integration of environmental, climate change, or sustainability education across the curriculum, rather than as distinguished subjects. Education about the environment also acts intergenerationally: such programmes at school encourage intergenerational discussions on environmental matters at home.

Higher levels of education are also associated with food choices that are less damaging to the environment.

Also, emissions increase with income, but crucially they decrease with education.

Research on the links between environmental sustainability and education paint a multi-layered picture. While education expansion may indirectly lead to higher pressure on the environment in the short run, the unsustainable levels of consumption associated with contemporary modern lifestyles is not a negative effect of education as such. On the contrary, education is part of the solution, as it is associated with more environmentally sustainable behaviour at a given level of income.

Education is an attractive investment in adaptive capacity that must be part of the hedge - if not an outright priority - over investment in specific infrastructure and technological response that are

predicated on being able to predict where and how the future effects of climate change will materialise.

## **Prosperity**

### **Building inclusive, sustainable communities**

The question of whether education and schooling create economic value is inextricably associated with the theory of human capital, both as a model of individual decision-making and as a key aspect of economic development.

Today, educational disparities by socioeconomic status are emerging as some of the largest differentials that can be observed almost everywhere and affecting the largest number of children. But also: economic inequality affects economic growth through education inequalities. Socioeconomic inequalities in education may have seen less reduction over the past two decades than have gender or other inequalities.

Data on a number of OECD cities show that difference in skills explains about 36% of the observed differences in productivity.

Education and training can enable informal workers to move into more lucrative forms of employment. But there is also ample evidence across developing countries that even those remaining in informal employment can benefit.

Most discussions about gender and human development take the role of girls and women as a starting point. However, not only do girls continue to face challenges in accessing quality education, and the threats of gender-based violence, exploitation, and discrimination, they also have to contend with the harsh social and economic realities once they enter the world of work. Nevertheless, “education directly contributes to gender socialisation patterns - sometimes by challenging them and other times by reproducing them”.

That more highly-educated individuals tend to be better off economically has been long known. Increasingly, the research debate is consolidating around the view that the intergenerational reproduction of social advantage and disadvantage by other means notwithstanding a substantial part of this advantage is a real reward to education attainment.

## **Peace**

### **Establishing positive peace and stable societies**

UNESCO's own purpose is to contribute to peace and security. Schooling is particularly important during crises because it provides shelter, a sense of normality, an opportunity for socialisation and demonstrates confidence in the future.

Violence is not only the act of physically harming someone. Violence is indeed defined “as the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have and what is. Violence is that which increases the distance between the potential and the actual, and that

which impedes the decrease of said distance”. As such, dying of tuberculosis in the eighteenth century could not be seen as violence, while today it may well fall within the definition.

The absence of such violence is a prerequisite for peace (negative peace), while positive peace requires the establishment of consensus around key social goals oriented towards more equitable and socially just systems. Indeed, global peace requires the undoing of structural inequalities within and across countries.

## Partnerships

### Promoting equitable networks for sustainable development

The process through which the SDGs came to life was substantially more inclusive and collaborative than the one that led to the MDGs. The extent to which the inclusion of different voices went beyond tokenism is questionable.

What characterises global governance today is the presence of a range of stakeholders beyond national governments and new institutions, and mechanisms beyond state-led, treaty-based regimes.

Recent research has demonstrated that better-educated countries have better governments, and this holds true for democracies and dictatorships. Building education systems that contribute to peaceful, just and inclusive societies requires more than effective governance: this process requires *good* governance.

Research also finds that learners are the best to partner with; by inviting children to voice their opinions and take an active role in improving classroom pedagogy, learning outcomes actually improve.

Despite its formulation as a catalyst for all other sectors of sustainable development, no special attention is given to Target 4.7. It is also not defined as a “means of implementation target”, which is a target that not only is very important but that if met, will allow other targets to be met as well./ Indeed, although the SDGs are considered ‘integrated and indivisible’, they are presented using a silos approach and no reference is made to links with other goals or targets.

## Conclusions

The conclusion of the book is that education is worth investing in, not because it is a silver bullet to end all sustainable development problems, but because processes of teaching and learning are a natural and defining characteristic of human society and the improvement of these processes on their own terms is in everyone’s interest.

Today it has been proven that there *is* a positive relationship between education and other sectors of sustainable development, and yet education remains an under-financed and under-prioritised sector, with many development experts dismissing it as less important than other sectors.

This may also be accountable for the scarce interest in investing in longitudinal studies: education's benefits are often felt in the long run and sadly governments want results before 2030.

However, the **purpose of education** should be defined beyond the transfer of largely academic and/or function knowledge and skills, to include the development of critical thinking and abstraction skills, as well as the tools for social cohesion, and that we therefore need more comprehensive ways of 'measuring' the impact of education. Instead, we continue to rely predominantly on standardised assessment, including PISA, which evaluates student learning outcomes in very narrow terms, and on quantitative measures on access-related issues.

The central narrative is that the tension between the intrinsic and instrumental value of education is resolved by taking a comprehensive cross-sector perspective. We therefore argue that *education is most successful at contributing to sustainable development across all its dimensions at once if, rather than being shaped as an instrument to achieve a specific narrow development impact, no matter how worthy, education is improved on its own terms and as an end in itself.*