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Lifelong learning for quality education: exploring the neglected aspect of sustainable development goal 4

Sue Webb, John Holford, Steven Hodge, Marcella Milana & Richard Waller

The sustainable development goals (SDGs) adopted by the leaders of the United Nations member states at the 70th session of the UN General assembly in September 2015, set out an agenda for global transformation. These SDGs, known as global goals, build on the strategy set by the millennium development goals (MDGs) to end all forms of poverty and focus even further on inequalities and climate change. In contrast to the MDGs, SDGs have been designed to extend the responsibility and loci for action worldwide by ensuring that all countries whether poor, rich or middle income engage in activities to promote prosperity that is sustainable for all. To ensure greater involvement of all countries with these tasks, a deliberative process involving the 193 Member States of the United Nations and many experts and representatives of organisations from across different areas of civil society was undertaken.

‘Quality Education’, named as just one of the 17 development goals (SDG Goal 4) has been defined as ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (UNESCO, 2016). But the 2030 Agenda also places education at the centre of the realisation of many of the other sustainable development goals, including Goal 3 Health and Well-being, Goal 5 Gender Equality, Goal 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth, Goal 12 Responsible Consumption and Production and Goal 13 Climate Change Mitigation. Arguably, the conception of education in these different goals draws on the underlying values of much adult and lifelong education and learning practice. For example, the UNESCO (2016, p. 8) guidelines on how to unpack education within the 2030 agenda identify three underlying principles as follows: firstly, ‘Education is a fundamental human right and an enabling right’, secondly, ‘Education is a public good’ and thirdly, ‘Gender equality is inextricably linked to the right to education for all’.

While these connections between education and some of the SDGs are rather obvious, recent research examining how UN reports conceive of education in relation to the SDGs highlights the interconnectedness of education and the majority of the SDGs, but the same research notes the neglect of the policy implementation aspects for education in these UN reports (Vladimirova & Le Blanc, 2016): ‘while our sample of

reports draws a comprehensive picture of interconnectedness between education and other SDGs, the perspective in most reports has a strong focus on developing countries, and relatively little on developed countries'. (Vladimirova & Le Blanc, 2016, p. 270). In continuing to focus on developing countries SDGs continue the focus set by the MDGs, and consequently, they are as likely to have the same partial success as MDGs (Regmi, 2015). In other words, in relation to geographical coverage, the focus of MDGs was mostly on low-income countries and countries affected by conflict in the global South, while in relation to scope and policy focus, the focus was more on young people completing primary and secondary school education, rather than on lifelong learning and access to tertiary education.

The OECD has also shown awareness of this problem, whereby high income and middle-income countries have underplayed the need for stronger strategies within their own national boundaries stating:

SDG 4 and its associated targets set an ambitious agenda that emphasises quality learning and equity in education alongside the more traditional indicators of access and participation. In doing so, it challenges every single country in the world to improve its education system and marks a significant departure from previous global education goals and targets, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA), that were not universal and focused more on access and participation. (OECD, 2017, p. 28).

However, to date the OECD report Education at a Glance 2017 (OECD, 2017, p. 27), in reviewing progress towards SDG 4 'Quality Education', notes that there are still many educational challenges in all OECD countries:

OECD and partner countries have been successful in their progress towards some of the SDG 4 targets, having partially achieved many of those relating to school infrastructure and access to basic education. However, significant challenges remain for many countries with respect to achieving targets that measure learning outcomes and equity. Although OECD countries have achieved gender parity in access to early levels of education, gender gaps appear in adult education and in learning outcomes.

An important distinction is being identified in this OECD report between structures that enable educational participation and practices that transform educational outcomes (in relation to knowledge, competences and skills) to ensure individuals' well-being and prosperity. The report draws attention to the continuing inequalities in educational outcomes in many countries particularly for those students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background at the point at which they leave school or

access technical and vocational education or higher education. Gender differences amongst adults persist also in educational participation and outcomes not just in the low-income countries. Clearly, these OECD data indicate that SDG 4 is a relevant goal for all countries.

Why is discussion of the focus of attention important? It is important because the main responsibility for monitoring and reporting on progress towards SDGs is at the national level, although the process is voluntary. Countries are expected to develop internal targets and accounting mechanisms, and the United Nations Development Group has supplied guidelines that encourage a deliberative process involving relevant stakeholders. Therefore, given that lifelong learning is specifically identified within SDG 4 and integrated into many other SDGs, as adult educators and researchers we need to consider how our field of knowledge and the practices of adult educators in different national contexts are being represented or included in the monitoring and reporting processes for the SDGs. And arguably we need to consider these processes and mechanisms for accountability in all countries and not regard this as a problem only for low-income countries. Interestingly, in Australia (where two of the authors of this article are based) the national conversation and consultation with civil society on the SDGs is being overseen by the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the department traditionally associated with providing aid to low-income countries. It is also this department along with the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet that are leading Australia's implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including the drafting of the first Voluntary National Report for presentation to the High Level Forum on Sustainable Development in New York in July 2018 (DFAT, 2017, website).

As a sector though, we do have something to add to the conversation. For example, two recent articles in this journal *International Journal of Lifelong Education* have taken up the question of what approaches to lifelong learning should guide the education agenda post-2015 and in particular, address Education 2030 and the SDGs. Regmi (2015) argues that the least developed countries (the group of 49 countries that are identified as not making much progress towards achieving the millennium development goals) have suffered from the predominance of narrow human capital models of education development, including their understanding of lifelong learning. In these contexts Regmi (2015) contends, it is insufficient for the UN to set sustainable development goals promoting lifelong learning without giving

due attention to the leadership needed in specific national contexts to develop relevant localised understandings of lifelong learning and its objectives which will be sustainable for the least developed countries. As Regmi (2015, p. 566) says ‘the neo-liberal perspective on lifelong learning should not be the post-2015 education agenda for the LDCs’. In Ghana, Casey and Asamoah (2016) identify examples of practices of adult education that are far removed from what they perceive to be the predominant development of human capital model of lifelong learning for economic objectives. Casey and Asamoah’s (2016) field study of non-formal learning sites in rural Ghana identified resilient humanistic conceptions and practices of non-formal adult education, which they argue fostered transformation, development and human flourishing in ways that are relevant and practical for implementing SDG 4.

Of like interest are the selected papers from the Second Conference of the Network on Policy Studies in Adult Education (a network of the European Society for research on the Education of Adults, ESREA) held in 2014, which have been published in a special issue of *International Review of Education* (see Milana, Rasmussen, & Holford, 2016). The articles, which include contributions from a number of different national and regional settings including the Anglophone world, Latin America, Denmark and China provide conceptual and empirical accounts of adult education and learning and societal sustainability.

Together these recent contributions to the field show the relevance of adult education to sustainability, as well as indicating how researchers and educators might encourage deliberative processes within countries about the SDGs. Researchers and educators should engage with what the notion of lifelong learning for sustainable development implies and requires. If they do – if they are allowed to do so – country-specific practices may begin to recognise that lifelong learning for global sustainability needs to question current notions of learning solely for economic purposes. Current models, with their emphasis on the race to be the winners, rather than losers, have done little to end inequalities.

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