

## Learning in the post-2015 education and development agenda

This statement is intended to contribute to the current international debate about education policies, goals and targets in the post-2015 international development agenda. It was inspired by discussions which emerged from the International Experts' Meeting on "Key Curricular and Learning Issues in the Post-2015 Education and Development Agenda", organized by the UNESCO International Bureau of Education (Geneva, Switzerland, 23-25 September 2013).<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Interest in learning has a long tradition in international educational policies

Recent attention to the global 'learning crisis' stems from an accumulation of evidence that, despite expanding access to primary education, basic learning levels are frequently very low: an estimated 250 million children demonstrate weak literacy and numeracy skills, especially among the poor and most marginalized groups. In response, many are calling on countries and the international community to work together to improve the quality of education and, more specifically, student learning. The IBE welcomes this renewed attention to learning—in addition to the existing focus on access to basic education.

It is worth recalling that the promotion and value of learning, in and of itself, has a long tradition in international education circles. The idea of lifelong learning, for instance, was first introduced as early as 1972 through the landmark publication, *Learning to Be: Education in the World of Today and Tomorrow*. The Education for All (EFA) movement launched in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 was based on a collective commitment to meet the basic learning needs of all. *Improving Primary Education in Developing Countries*, a key input to Jomtien, placed great emphasis on the learning dimension (Lockheed and Verspoor 1991). Several years later, the 1996 publication, *Learning: The Treasure Within*, commonly referred to as the *Delors Report*, proposed an integrated vision of education based on the four pillars of learning to be, to know, to do, and to live together.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/global-news-archive/single-news/news/key-curricular-and-learning-issues-in-the-post-2015-education-and-development-agenda.html>

<sup>2</sup> Faure et al., *Learning To Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow*, Paris, 1972. *World Declaration on Education for All and Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs*, adopted by the 'World Conference

## 2. The narrowing scope of learning

Having said this, the IBE expresses concerns over the rather narrowly defined conceptions of and approaches to learning in many post-2015 documents.<sup>3</sup> Learning outside the formal school system is largely ignored. The distinctiveness of adult learning frameworks is minimized. Learning outcomes—and generally only those measurable in standardized tests—are prioritized, while the content (or curricular) dimensions of learning—e.g., school subjects, syllabi, textbooks—are marginalized. Insufficient attention is given to learning processes and pedagogical approaches, and to the diverse expectations, needs and experiences of learners in classrooms and educational programmes. Traditional school knowledge and basic skills are disproportionately highlighted over a wide array of learning areas that include attitudinal, affective and behavioural changes among learners—such as ethics, civic responsibility, emotional maturity, moral character, tolerance of diversity, curiosity, cooperation, aesthetic appreciation, social relations, community solidarity and environmental responsibility. Research indicates that social and emotional development supports and promotes academic learning and the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy. In short, narrowing the scope of learning to easily measurable knowledge and skills among the schooled minimizes the rich array of learner experiences nurtured by educational frameworks over the life course.

## 3. Curriculum is at the heart of quality learning

The curriculum organizes and gives meaning to a multiplicity of educational activities that facilitate learning. It imparts overt knowledge to learners. It provides a basis for socializing children, youth and adults from diverse backgrounds. It conveys a wide range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in classrooms and diverse educational settings. In short, the school curriculum embodies a society's educational aims and purposes. It encapsulates what learners should learn, why, when and how; and what they should do while attending school.

Educationists agree that the curriculum is a vital foundation for learning-related educational reform. For reforms to be effective, the curriculum should reflect a society's

---

on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs', Jomtien, Thailand, 5–9 March 1990. Delors et al., *Learning: The Treasure Within*, Paris, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance: World Bank, *Learning for All*, Washington DC, 2011; the work of the UIS-Brookings Institution-coordinated Learning Metrics Task Force; the proposals made for a learning goal in the May 2012 Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (<http://www.post2015hlp.org/>); the Commonwealth Ministerial Working Group [Recommendations for the Post-2015 Development Framework for Education](#) (August 2012); or Save the Children's vision for a post-2015 framework (*Ending Poverty in Our Generation*, January 2013) (<http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/ending-poverty-our-generation>).

shared vision of education “while taking into account local, national and global needs and expectations.”<sup>4</sup> It should be based on multi-stakeholder discussions that seek common understandings and political and social consensus. As a means of implementing educational aims, the curriculum implies the coordination of policy and planning, the preparation of appropriate textbooks and other learning support resources, teacher preparation and capacity building, and learning assessment. Curriculum is thus at the heart of quality learning. Curricular materials, like textbooks, are essential for improvements in basic literacy and numeracy as foundations for lifelong learning.

#### **4. Teachers are an essential component of quality learning**

Whether understood as ‘facilitators of learning’ or ‘leaders of learning’, good teachers are essential for quality learning. Increasingly the traditional role of teachers as ‘transmitters of knowledge’ is being transformed into one in which teachers nurture a passion for learning and enable new forms of learning, especially in the digital age. Teachers need to be able to adapt their teaching practices to the needs of learners from diverse backgrounds, including marginalized, vulnerable and poor communities and conflict-affected societies. As such, the selection and recruitment of the best graduates and the preparation of good teachers remain a central policy concern. Countries need, therefore, to develop comprehensive policies to improve the quality of the teaching force as well as their status, remuneration and working conditions.<sup>5</sup>

#### **5. Finding a balance between standardized assessments and classroom-based formative assessments**

Most international and regional assessments are summative assessments, mainly for stakeholders *external* to the school—e.g., policy analysts, ministry officials and inspectors, curriculum developers and educational researchers. They generally utilize a single metric to assess basic knowledge and skill levels acquired by students mostly in three curricular areas: language, mathematics and sciences. While these assessments are contributing to a better understanding of existing learning gaps, one of their drawbacks is how little they inform the decisions made by local educational leaders and the daily practices of teachers in classrooms. Another drawback is their weak ability to support effectively the developmental needs of students from diverse backgrounds. Further, they may serve to undermine reforms meant to enhance the inclusive nature of basic education.

---

<sup>4</sup> See UNESCO IBE presentation brochure (Geneva, July 2013).  
[http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Publications/Institutional\\_Docs/IBE\\_brochure\\_2013\\_eng.pdf](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/Institutional_Docs/IBE_brochure_2013_eng.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See [UNESCO Principles for Education and Development Beyond 2015](#), Paris, March 2013.

In addition, these low-stakes assessments—i.e., with little direct impact on a child’s progress in the educational system or in life—can be detrimental to the professionalism and agency of teachers. By virtue of their particular accounts of learning, especially among younger students, standardized assessments may contribute to undermining the quality of teacher-student interactions and distorting curricular reforms. The IBE believes that the balance of assessments should emphasize to a greater extent teacher-designed, classroom-based formative assessments aimed at improving teaching and learning processes.

## **6. Access and quality dimensions are inseparable and intertwined**

Access to basic education cannot be separated from the equitable provision of quality education. It is worth reiterating the broad-based approach to quality education and learning adopted at the Dakar conference and since then. It was argued that quality learning requires nourished and motivated students; well-trained teachers employing active pedagogies to support personalized learning; adequate facilities and instructional materials; clearly defined, effectively taught and accurately assessed curricular knowledge and skills; and a healthy, safe, gender-sensitive learning environment that makes full use of children’s local language skills ([Expanded Commentary](#), 2000: 15-17)<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, rather than a target goal that promotes ‘access plus learning’, the international community should promote an integrated approach to *inclusive quality education*. Learning plus expanding opportunities should anchor educational targets and aim for *equitable access to relevant and effective learning for all*.

## **7. Towards a flexible agenda / framework of principles**

There is thus a need to return to foundational questions relating to the aims and purposes of education and a more holistic, integrated and humanistic vision of learning. The definition of the aims of education is more of a political and societal than a technical issue, and cannot be reduced to internationally agreed-upon goals and targets to be measured. It is about the relevance of learning, and curriculum development as a social, cultural and political process. A global agenda of common goals and targets to ensure equitable access to effective and relevant learning for all certainly needs to be pursued as the foundation for lifelong learning beyond 2015. This agenda, however, must be complemented by a more flexible framework of inspirational principles that might guide

---

<sup>6</sup> See also the International Conference on Education, Geneva, [2004](#) and [2008](#); EFA/PRELAC, [Quality Education for All: A Human Rights Issue](#), Buenos Aires, 2007; EFA Global Monitoring Report, [Education for All: The Quality Imperative](#), Paris, 2005.

our evolving visions of relevant learning contents, processes and outcomes in a lifelong perspective.

In sum, the notion of 'learning' in the education and development discourse cannot be reduced to learning outcomes and their measurement. It should be broadly conceived and comprehensive. It should focus on learning goals, contents and processes as well as on outcomes. It should consider the effective acquisition of foundational skills and transferable competences, as well as the relevance of learning for individuals, their families and communities, and for society at large.