



Education and the sustainable development agenda

With the launch of the global Sustainable Development Goals agenda in 2015 comes an opportunity to critically reflect on the role of education in, through, and for sustainable development.

- It is widely understood that there is a positive relationship between education and other dimensions of development, and populations around the world continue to show a clear desire for more and better education. Despite this, it remains an under-financed and under-prioritized sector within development as a whole.
- In this policy brief, IIASA researchers argue that education should be pursued as both an end and a powerful means of development – an argument that is strengthened rather than undermined if the many instrumental benefits that follow from improved education and how they seem to arise are taken seriously.
- In terms of enabling physical, mental, and socioemotional wellbeing, education can be a fundamental building block of development in its own right. Education initiatives in the sectors most closely connected with human wellbeing however, must first succeed on educational terms in order to meet their sector-specific objectives and succeed overall.
- General education has a positive role to play in achieving the environmental goals of sustainable development, which supports the claim that investing in good education is key to achieving sustainable development.
- Educational equality promotes income growth and reduces income inequality, which in turn leads to more cohesive, stable, and happy societies. It can also increase political knowledge, and promote civic culture and participation in democratic politics.
- In short, education is worth investing in, not because it is the elusive 'silver bullet' to end all sustainable development problems, but because processes of teaching and learning are a natural and defining characteristic of society. The improvement of education on its own terms is therefore in everyone's interest.

Education: A powerful means of development

In September 2015, heads of state and government representatives from around the world committed to a new sustainable development agenda in the form of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 accompanying targets. The framing document for the SDGs, UN Resolution 70/1, *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, envisions an important role for education within this agenda, both as an end and a powerful means of development.

Within the dominant development discourse as a whole however, education has been – and continues to be – simultaneously under-appreciated in terms of the contribution it can make to other aspects of development, and over-emphasized in its role as an instrument of development when it does make it onto the agenda.

In their recently published book, *The Role of Education in Enabling the Sustainable Development Agenda*, IIASA researchers explore these tensions through an extensive, critical review of literature from a range of disciplines, arguing that the capability to be educated is, in and of itself, an important freedom and consequently, a fundamental aspect of human and planetary wellbeing.

Enabling physical, mental, and socioemotional wellbeing

There is a symbiotic relationship between education and other development sectors closely connected with wellbeing, namely water, sanitation, and hygiene (together represented by the acronym WASH), as well as health and nutrition. The dominant development discourse however, continues to emphasize only one side of this relationship, with health, nutrition and WASH presented as fundamental building blocks for education, while little attention is paid to education as a development building block in its own right. Education is subsequently 'demoted' in agendas, even though researchers have found that improved educational attainment tends to lead to longer, healthier lives, and the target populations of development continue to prioritize it, often ahead of other sectors. In addition, the training of health and nutrition specialists, scientists, and the many other sector-specific professionals who will be required to support the achievement of the sustainable development agenda, is often not recognized as 'education', but is more commonly referred to as 'capacity building'.

According to the literature, sector-specific education at any level is at its core about teaching and learning and must therefore succeed on educational terms, for example, by supporting the building of key critical thinking and socioemotional skills, in order to meet its sector-specific objectives and succeed overall. Surprisingly, while discussions around capacity building would benefit greatly from the insights of educators, these insights are rarely sought.

Ensuring environmental sustainability and equity

The review uncovered complex interactions in the relationship between education and environmental sustainability. On the one hand, there is a strong positive association between female education and choice of modern, cleaner energy and technology, while on the other, the higher average incomes associated with higher education come with greater consumption in the short term. This suggests that higher education levels are not good for the environment overall. However, whereas the magnitude of consumption may increase with education, there is evidence of greater efficiency at higher levels of educational attainment.

There is also robust evidence at country, community, household, and individual levels that formal education has an advantage when it comes to the reduction of vulnerability to environmental change, as well as in terms of preparing for, surviving, and coping with climate-related and other natural disasters. Finally, higher educational attainment is also associated with increased awareness of and concern for environmental issues, and thus a greater willingness and capacity to support and affect pro-environmental institutional and policy change. This means that there is good reason to believe that improved education levels will be positive for the environment in the long term.

It is important to note that these positive effects depend on general education, rather than specific environmental education programs, which strengthens the researchers' central argument that investing in 'good' education is key to achieving sustainable development.

Building inclusive, sustainable communities

It has long been understood that education as human capital contributes to higher incomes at the individual

level, as well as to economic growth at the national level through various direct and indirect mechanisms. The development community adopted this insight and began investing in increasing educational attainment as a key strategy for global poverty reduction and overall economic growth.

From the 1980s through to the early 2000s, the development community focused their investment almost exclusively at the basic education level as articulated in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in response to research findings suggesting that primary education had a higher rate of return than other levels of education. This prioritization was to the detriment of early childhood, secondary, technical, and vocational education. Recent evidence has called into question this assumption of decreasing educational returns, and the SDG for education now highlights the importance of 'lifelong learning'.

The MDGs were also criticized for prioritizing access over quality, and for marginalizing the already marginalized and increasing inequality. The SDGs are however more qualitative in nature, and explicitly discuss the importance of leaving no one behind. Investment in quality and equity are therefore not just a matter of principle, rather the relationship between education and economic growth is stronger if quality is taken into account. In fact, equitable, quality education promotes income growth and reduces income inequality, which in turn leads to more cohesive, stable, and happy societies.

Establishing positive peace and stable societies

A defining moment for the field of international educational development came with the publication of a special UN report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, which highlighted the importance of ensuring access to education in situations of conflict. Informally, education had long been included as part of the humanitarian response, but it was not until the late 1990s that it was formalized as a subfield of international education – known as education in emergencies (EiE) – and embraced by the international education community. Unfortunately, it is clear from the review of existing research that this has not been the case in the broader development community.

EiE has been characterized by rapid professionalization on the one hand, and relatively slow academic



development on the other. While there is quality research available in EiE, it tends to be small-scale, qualitative, and applied. It also predominantly consists of projects in the Global South being carried out by stakeholders from the Global North, which is problematic as it suggests that violence and conflict are localized to the Global South, while it is actually a phenomenon that transcends national and ethnic boundaries as an international education problem.

Moving from the consideration of violence in schools to understanding the relationship between violence and education more broadly, the literature suggests that countries with higher levels of primary and secondary school enrolment experience lower risk of outbreak of civil war and armed conflict. Furthermore, education has been shown to increase political knowledge and promote civic culture and participation in democratic politics.

Promoting equitable networks for sustainable development

The review included a number of studies showing that historically, the agenda for the Global South has been established by the countries of the Global North through a number of influential international agencies that typically define themselves as external partners and experts. In this regime, the Global South is seen as the source of the world's problems, and the Global North as the exporter of solutions to those problems. In addition, all aspects of the development agenda, including education, have been dominated by an approach to target setting that, on the one hand, prioritizes economic growth and poverty reduction, and on the other, favors easily quantifiable measures to chart progress.

Although the international education community articulated a holistic vision involving both quantitative

and qualitative dimensions of teaching and learning for education for all (EFA) at the second World Conference on EFA in Dakar, Senegal in 2000, the MDG for education drafted that year significantly pared back that vision by focusing exclusively on universal primary enrolment. The shift in the language of the SDGs however, is encouraging. Not only does SDG 4 call for the international community to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”, it also includes a target explicitly linking education to sustainable development, human rights, and peaceful societies.

Despite the many challenges with building consensus around concepts such as human rights and sustainable development, a number of studies have demonstrated that educational approaches that combine content and processes hold promise. This applies not only in terms of improving the quality of education, but also in terms of a revitalized partnership based on values of reflection and collaboration.

Education in, through, and for sustainable development

In sum, education is worth investing in, not because it is the elusive ‘silver bullet’ to end all sustainable development problems, but because processes of teaching and learning are a natural and defining characteristic of human society. The improvement of education on its own terms is therefore in everyone’s interest. Education is most successful at contributing to sustainable development across all dimensions at once if, rather than being crafted as an instrument to achieve a specific and narrow development objective – no matter how worthy – it is improved on its own terms, and as an end in itself.



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This brief is based on work recently published in a new book, *The Role of Education in Enabling the Sustainable Development Agenda*, by IIASA researchers, Stephanie Bengtsson, Bilal Barakat, Raya Muttarak, and Endale Kebede, in which they explore the relationship between education and other key sectors of development globally. The book builds on work carried out for the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report.

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