

International Advocacy on Literacy and Development: Challenges and Opportunities

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Since the World Declaration on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 – which was reinforced in Dakar in 2000 – one of the six Education for All (EFA) goals has slipped off the global agenda more than any other: **adult literacy**, the forgotten goal! Even Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has risen up the agenda, as has youth and vocational education, and there is a lot more focus now on the goal on quality of education. But adult literacy remains stubbornly ignored.

Adult Literacy was initially squeezed out by the fact that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) only focus on two of the six EFA goals. Governments and donors have almost stopped investing in adult literacy. What was one of the pivotal elements in post-independence / revolution development policy and programming is now off the radar. The World Bank (WB) and the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) are both complicit: in the case of DFID there was a shift because of the MDG focus of Clare Short, which contrasts with Baroness Chalker's approach when she was at DFID's predecessor, the Overseas Development Administration (ODA). The situation has been especially exacerbated by the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) set up in 2002, which harmonised donor effort around MDGs.

On the few occasions when there have been larger investments, governments have used **outdated or traditional conceptions** of literacy (ignoring all the literature on cultural meanings and diverse literacies) and ineffective teaching methods. This occurs partly because advocates are so desperate for any investment; they will therefore use any arguments to convince politicians, claiming they can achieve quick-wins with short campaigns at low cost.

This left creative **participatory work on literacy to NGOs**. Many of these are unsustainable, fragmented and dangerously competitive. There has been an inclination to use different labels and brands. I was personally closely involved in the Reflect approach (www.reflect-action.org) and there are hundreds of organisations across dozens of countries who actively used Reflect. However, there were many others who were doing excellent participatory and ground-breaking work with adult literacy and we tended to be splintered by aligning ourselves to different names rather than working to find the common ground.

When the MDGs were first established, the year 2015 was the target date when all were to have been achieved. As we now approach the **post 2015** period, there are significant

opportunities. Huge debates are raging – a much more open process than the closed-door MDGs – though excessive consultation does not guarantee a better decision in the end. I will touch on opportunities, challenges and ways forward.

1 Opportunities / Positives

There is a growing consensus on what works in the field of adult literacy, as captured for example in the 12 **international benchmarks** proposed by the Global Campaign for Education (GCE). In all, 67 programmes in 35 countries responded - and we drew out a set of common threads from these to formulate possible benchmarks. These were then reviewed and commented on / verified by 142 respondents from 47 countries. See annex for summary and also see full report, Writing the Wrongs:

http://www.actionaid.org/sites/files/actionaid/writing_the_wrongs_-_full_-_english.pdf

The recommendations of the **High Level Panel** convened by Ban Ki Moon around setting the post 2015 development agenda (<http://www.un.org/sg/management/hlppost2015.shtml>) refer to lifelong learning - and literacy can be seen as pivotal to addressing the cross-cutting issues raised by the panel:

- No-one left behind
- Sustainable development
- Transforming economies
- Building peace
- Holding public institutions to account.

Literacy is indeed crucial for delivering on the various proposed goals:

- Ending poverty
- Empowering women
- Ensuring healthy lives
- Increasing food security
- Promoting sustainable livelihoods.

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) is now much more focused on **education sector plans**. This means that although child-narrative dominates and there is a reductive goal on early-grade reading, national governments are in the driving seat and if they include adult literacy in their sector plans it has a chance of being funded (as happened in Burkina Faso).

UNESCO's Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA), held in Brazil in 2009 at least pushed for a challenge to present statistics and introduced the concept of **low literacy**. Sadly, however, the UN has not moved on this - and the CONFINTEA process was one of the most frustrating lobbying experiences of my life!

The 11th **Global Monitoring Report** warns that poor quality education has left a "legacy of illiteracy more widespread than previously believed." It calls for more attention to inequality in

education and laments that adult literacy and adult education are often sidelined in global debates. See <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/efareport/reports/2013>

2 Dangers and challenges

Many actors are pushing for a **narrow education goal** based simply on early grade reading in primary schools, completely ignoring adults. There is also a big focus on **measurement and assessment** of learning rather than actions that might actually improve learning – see the work of the Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF) at

<http://www.brookings.edu/about/centers/universal-education/learning-metrics-task-force>

The discourse is dominated by looking at **economic returns**, which is unsurprising given the continued ascendancy of the World Bank and the growing power of private sector voices such as Pearson: see <http://www.pearsonfoundation.org/>. Public education is under threat: low-fee private schools are spreading and DFID is supporting this too (see my blog for the Guardian at: <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2013/oct/04/uk-aid-private-schools-developing-world>).

It is all part of a package – reduce outcomes to simple tests and league tables. See my draft article in Annex 2 below on LMTF to be published soon.

At a deeper level, the **whole framework is problematic**, using aid as a lever to assert an international neo-liberal agenda over diverse national education priorities.

The problem is also not helped by endless **internal battles in Unesco** between Paris and Hamburg, which typifies the overall dis-functionality of Unesco.

3 Ways forward

Firstly, there needs to be a fundamental shift of focus towards expanding **domestic financing** if national governments are to regain control over setting their own education priorities.

- Hit **share of the budget** – 6% GDP or 20% of budgets
- Resist the **IMF strictures** and austerity policies – move to more expansionary macro-economic policies and see education as investment not money down the drain. Educate Ministries of Finance!
- Expand the **domestic tax base** and make sure it is progressive.
 - Don't give away tax holidays / exemptions; Kenya gives away \$1.1b, which could double the education budget. Worldwide this represents a lost \$138b.;
 - Stop avoidance / transfer pricing and havens – Zambia loses \$2 billion (double the education budget). SAB Miller, one of the world's leading brewers, pays no tax in Africa. Half of global trade is now internal within corporations;

- Impose tax on extractives – a new tax on natural resource extraction in Brazil for example commits 75% of funds raised to education;
- Stop cheating; in Uganda, Heritage Oil owes \$404m, which is five times the estimated education financing gap.
- See for example:
http://www.campaignforeducation.org/docs/reports/GCE_A%20TAXING%20BUSINESS.pdf

This re-assertion of domestic financing and domestic decision-making represents the **best prospect for renewed investment in progressive adult literacy** programmes in most countries. Without more money and more domestic control, adult literacy will always suffer.

Secondly, there needs to be a push towards **civil society mobilisation and advocacy** on education. Since 2000 we have seen the emergence of the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) plus regional coalitions and over 100 national education coalitions. These did not exist in 2000, and they can bring that focus on domestic policy: many are passionate about youth and adult literacy. See www.campaignforeducation.org

There is also a need to build national **tax justice alliances** such as the **Global Alliance for Tax Justice**. See www.gatj.org/ We have seen the power in UK and US, where Google, Amazon, Vodafone, Boots and others have been shamed. However, the biggest injustices are in the poorest countries with the weakest revenue authorities and governments that corporates can bully. The link needs to be made between education and health and tax geeks and unions and SMCs into really broad alliances that are about national development strategies that are nationally developed - reclaiming sovereignty.

For me this effort around **tax justice is itself an adult literacy project**: we all need to build out basic literacy around economics and budgets because otherwise we cede too much power to an unaccountable priesthood of neoliberal economists.

Meanwhile in the UK, **DFID, is an influential voice** in many of these debates and what they say can make a big difference. GCE UK can help: at a recent All-Party Parliamentary Group discussion, concerns were raised about the move away from women's literacy. To be coherent, the focus should be on DFID moving to a situation where they genuinely support domestic education priorities rather than imposing their own agenda.

ANNEX 1 - BENCHMARKS

1. Literacy is about the acquisition and use of reading, writing and numeracy skills, and **thereby** the development of active citizenship, improved health and livelihoods, and gender equality. The goals of literacy programmes should reflect this understanding.
2. Literacy should be seen as a **continuous process** that requires sustained learning and application. There are no magic lines to cross from illiteracy into literacy. All policies and programmes should be defined to encourage sustained participation and celebrate progressive achievement rather than focusing on one-off provision with a single end point.
3. **Governments have the lead responsibility** in meeting the right to adult literacy and in providing leadership, policy frameworks, an enabling environment and resources. They should:
 - ensure cooperation across all relevant ministries and links to all relevant development programmes,
 - work in systematic collaboration with experienced civil society organisations,
 - ensure links between all these agencies, especially at the local level, and
 - ensure relevance to the issues in learners' lives by promoting the decentralisation of budgets and of decision-making over curriculum, methods and materials.
4. It is important to invest in ongoing **feedback and evaluation mechanisms**, data systematization and strategic research. The focus of evaluations should be on the practical application of what has been learnt and the impact on active citizenship, improved health and livelihoods, and gender equality.
5. To **retain facilitators** it is important that they should be **paid** at least the equivalent of the minimum wage of a primary school teacher for all hours worked (including time for training, preparation and follow-up).
6. Facilitators should be local people who receive substantial initial training and regular refresher training, as well as having ongoing opportunities for exchanges with other facilitators. Governments should put in place a framework for the **professional development** of the adult literacy sector, including for trainers / supervisors - with full opportunities for facilitators across the country to access this (e.g. through distance education).
7. There should be a ratio of at least one facilitator to 30 learners and at least one trainer/ supervisor to 15 learner groups (1 to 10 in remote areas), ensuring a minimum of one

support visit per month. Programmes should have timetables that **flexibly respond** to the daily lives of learners but which provide for regular and sustained contact (e.g. twice a week for at least two years).

8. In multi-lingual contexts it is important at all stages that learners should be given an **active choice about the language** in which they learn. Active efforts should be made to encourage and sustain bilingual learning.
9. A wide range of **participatory methods** should be used in the learning process to ensure active engagement of learners and **relevance to their lives**. These same participatory methods and processes should be used at all levels of training of trainers and facilitators.
10. Governments should take responsibility for stimulating the market for **production and distribution of a wide variety of materials** suitable for new readers, for example by working with publishers / newspaper producers. They should balance this with funding for the local production of materials, especially by learners, facilitators and trainers.
11. A good quality literacy programme that respects all these benchmarks is likely to **cost between US\$50 and US\$100** per learner per year for at least three years (two years initial learning + ensuring further learning opportunities are available for all)
12. Governments should dedicate at least **3% of their national education sector budgets to adult literacy programmes** as conceived in these benchmarks. Where governments deliver on this international donors should fill any remaining resource gaps (e.g. through including adult literacy in the Fast Track Initiative).

Annex 2 – Draft article on the Learning Metrics Task Force

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE LEARNING METRICS TASK FORCE

David Archer - Jan 24th 2014

Over the past two years I have been an active member of the Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF), an international effort convened by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics and the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution. The overarching objective was “*to create a shift in the global conversation on education from a focus on access to access plus learning*”. It aimed to make learning “*a central component of the post-2015 global development agenda and to make recommendations for common goals to improve learning opportunities and outcomes*”. As I re-read the various reports from LMTF (see for example the summary report “Towards Universal Learning: recommendations from the LMTF”) I found myself critically reflecting on what we collectively produced and feel compelled to share some thoughts.

The LMTF calls for a **global paradigm shift** towards access plus learning and this is a problematic framing of the task. Whilst the MDGs focused only on two access-related education goals, the education community has always been concerned with learning. The quality of education and learning outcomes are explicitly part of the Education For All framework agreed initially in 1990 in Jomtien and reinforced in Dakar in 2000. It is problematic to suggest that somehow the education community was previously obsessed with access. Indeed there were widespread laments at how the MDGs reduced the EFA agenda and many strong critiques of the World Bank and others for promoting a reductive agenda. So, yes, we need to address learning but this is not a sudden new discovery for most educators and it is not really a paradigm shift.

The LMTF report claims that “*the education community has reached a consensus on the skills and competencies that are important . . . and a small set of indicators that are feasible and desirable to track at the global level.*” I fear this is an over-statement. It may be that 1,700 people in 118 countries made some contribution at some moment to the process - but this was a very ad hoc process. There were no Ministers of Education, there was no mechanism to ensure people were representative of the wider education community and the vast majority who did participate were given no opportunity to endorse or vote on the conclusions reached. It may be right to say there is consensus on the importance of learning – but that was largely pre-existing. But it is wrong to claim consensus on a small set of indicators and the desirability of global tracking. Indeed this is widely contested. There are many people across the education community who see this approach as reinforcing a narrow focus on testing, which they would vigorously oppose.

On reflection, perhaps the biggest problem with LMTF was that whilst the overarching objective and aims were about learning, its **focus in practice was purely on measuring and assessing learning, not actually improving learning**. This of course might be obvious from the use of the word “metrics” in the title, but the task force did frame itself to be more broadly

about “learning” and there is no parallel or linked effort on the same scale which does actually focus on improving learning. Crucially, no systematic effort has been made by LMTF to establish the connections between measuring learning and improving learning. As the saying goes, you don’t make a pig heavier by weighing it more often. Improved statistics do not inherently contribute to improved learning. How you can maximise the links between assessment and improved learning is a rich area to explore – but this was not even touched upon. Perhaps this was because to do so would have led in a very different direction, away from summative assessments and global data and much more towards decentralised formative assessment by teachers in the classroom. In fact one of the most shocking elements in the LMTF reports on learning is the almost complete invisibility of teachers.

But before I raise any further concerns it is important to highlight some of the **positive contributions** of the LMTF. As a whole I think the task force helped to challenge the complacency that was setting in within some international policy circles that global education goals had been largely met and that therefore a post-2015 education goal was not needed. By highlighting the shockingly poor learning outcomes achieved in many countries the LMTF has helped to refresh the case for a focus on education.

Another major contribution has been to move the debate on from a focus on narrow literacy and numeracy outcomes by highlighting **seven domains of learning**: physical well-being, social and emotional, culture and the arts, literacy and communication, learning approaches and cognition, numeracy and maths, science and technology. There have been some influential voices arguing for a post-2015 goal framed around early grade reading or writing, and the Global Partnership for Education has set a strategic objective on learning which is similarly narrowly framed. By asserting a broad, holistic framework LMTF is much more consistent with the human rights commitment that the aims of education should be about the development of the full human personality. In the context of tendencies to focus only on primary schooling it is also positive that LMTF’s framework starts with early childhood education and continues through to at least lower secondary / post-primary education. There are some concerns that can be raised about the logic of the seven domains: they do not organically link with cognitive development theory or learning psychology and some key areas of learning such as history are not very evident – but these are not proposed as a curriculum and their inclusiveness does represent an advance against those advocating a narrow framework.

The LMTF should also be welcomed for its **focus on equity**, recognising that the inequalities within countries are often masked by national level data. There is a recognition that countries need to map access and learning against diverse characteristics of children in order to ensure equitable learning opportunities – and this is often overlooked. Similarly the attention placed on **supporting country systems** is important as it suggests that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution and that diverse contexts will require diverse investments to improve assessment and learning.

These positive elements are counterbalanced by some **elements which need serious continuing discussion**, notably the focus on learning indicators for global tracking. Seven areas

of measurement for global tracking are proposed, each of which is a composite of different indicators, many of which are not clearly established (e.g. breadth of learning / citizen of the world / readiness to learn). If elaborated this would end up involving dozens of actual indicators that it is suggested should be globally tracked. This is in significant tension with the focus on supporting country systems that operate in diverse contexts and risks creating an overwhelming pressure for standardisation.

Of course some groups benefit from **global standardisation of indicators** and testing, perhaps most obviously those large scale private providers who can develop common tests and offers common services on a high volume basis, removing smaller competitors and facilitating higher profits. But many others are likely to be losers, perhaps most obviously children themselves who face assessments that are culturally inappropriate or teachers who find their performance judged without contextual factors being taken into account. Those teaching or learning in difficult circumstances, in minority languages with complex scripts, in poor areas, with large class sizes or inadequate facilities will tend to come predictably bottom of the resulting league tables.

Whilst most people involved in LMTF would not want to support a **culture of standardised testing**, this is perhaps one of the most likely unintended consequences. There were some enlightened discussions within the task force about the dangers of testing, but these are not articulated strongly in the final reports. Indeed, assessment is presented as a “public good”. The intention behind this statement is positively intended – that tools, documents and data should be made freely available and any cost barriers to assessment should be eliminated. But the interpretation of this risks something very different – a celebration of assessment and testing as inherently worthwhile (whether or not it results in improvements to learning).

I do not need to cover here all the dangers associated with a **testing-led education system** as others have articulated this powerfully enough over the years. But it is worth reminding ourselves that obsessive “teaching to the test” can actively undermine learning. It can destroy the joy of learning and mean learners might be driven to pass a test but will not develop transferable or practical skills. The more focus given to testing within a system the more likely it is that things that cannot be easily tested will be overlooked. In its worst forms testing can create horrendous stress for children and for teachers, creating a climate that is far from conducive. I am convinced that this is not the intention of those involved in the LMTF, but because this is not explicitly challenged in the LMTF reports those who read them could easily get the wrong impression and may forget that testing is not teaching.

One way in which LMTF could avoid being associated with high-stakes classroom testing is to highlight the value of **household based surveys** for collecting data. There are many examples of surveys which can generate some powerful information about the overall education levels of the population – helpfully capturing information about children out of school as well as those who are in school. There are challenges in how these are best designed and how the data is best used. Household level surveys can provide useful contextual information about socio-economic status – though they cannot provide contextual information about the school

experience or learning environment of children. As such these surveys can raise issues around levels of learning but cannot be used for diagnostic purposes to work out what needs to be done to improve learning. The important thing is not to let this data be mis-used.

To be diagnostic about how to improve learning we need a massive complementary investment in **formative assessment by teachers** themselves. LMTF makes no serious mention of this and yet this is surely the most crucial step in linking assessment to improved learning. Teachers need to be trained to identify the progress that individual learners are making and to adjust their teaching methods accordingly. In some contexts this is a routine part of teacher development but in many parts of the world there are major threats to the teaching profession. In Africa there is a rapid spread of non-professional teachers who are not trained even in the basics let alone how to do formative assessment. Indeed, for far too long global policy dialogue and financing of education has overlooked the critical role of teacher training and professional development. This has meant that old models of pre-service residential training colleges have been left to decline, rather than attention being paid to how to reinvent teacher training with a greater focus on classroom practice, in-service training and support or mentoring programmes.

Sadly, perhaps unintentionally, LMTF has added its loud voice to the **resounding silence on teachers**. There is no analysis of the threats to learning outcomes posed by non-professional teachers or the under-investment in renewing teacher training systems. There is no analysis of the crucial role that teachers play in assessing and improving learning. If the serious intent of the LMTF is to put learning on the global agenda it has missed the crucial ingredient. We should be talking about teaching and learning together.

Unfortunately the silence on teachers is perhaps not entirely unintentional. There are many people who really do see teachers as the problem, who persistently highlight ghost teachers and absenteeism of teachers or who blame teachers for poor learning outcomes. There is rarely any contextual analysis to these attacks on teachers and rarely is there any solution posed. Of course ghost teachers should not be on the payroll and teachers should turn up. Stronger accountability systems are often needed and many of us in civil society are working hard to do this, linking local, district and national efforts to improve the accountability of the public education system. But rather than focus on them as the problem we need to focus on professional teachers as the key part of the solution. We need to listen to them and give them a voice in policy dialogue at all levels because they are the ones on the front-line in the classroom and they are the ones who can make actual improvements in learning happen.

One of the reasons why LMTF ignores teachers is that the **framing around “learning outcomes”** is sometimes presented as being contrasted with a focus on “inputs”. It is suggested that people who talk about “inputs” are dinosaurs – that this is the old way of doing things that got us into this mess, producing poor learning outcomes - and that it is time to move on. I find this rather bizarre as it suggests a lack of interest in how we might actually improve learning outcomes – what are the levers that might bring about positive changes to outcomes? It seems to me to be self-evident that we should balance talk about outcomes with continued attention

to inputs and processes. We need to look at how we can develop well trained teachers with the ability to assess the progress of individual children and we need to keep a close eye on class sizes, on adequate infrastructure, on the relevance of the curriculum, on ensuring there are decent textbooks that arrive in classrooms and get used, on promoting participatory teaching-learning processes rather than rote learning, on deepening relationships and accountabilities between schools and parents and communities. When assessments suggest that some schools are performing well and others less so we need to get under the skin and look at the inputs and processes which may have led to these outcomes. By definition outcomes arise from these inputs and processes and you cannot make adjustments directly to the outcomes in themselves. LMTF should have done more to highlight such connections rather than feed into the cult of self-contained learning outcomes.

The re-framing of the education agenda around learning outcomes is also deeply problematic because it **undermines the framework of education rights**. Diverse international conventions and treaties have built a complex understanding of the right to education, perhaps best captured by Katarina Tomasevski's (late UN Rapporteur on the Right to Education) in her articulation of 4 As – that education should be available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable (see www.right-to-education.org). These rights are indivisible and inter-dependent and provide a powerful framework for promoting quality education. A focus on learning outcomes is not only problematic because it is truncated but also because there is no right as such to a fixed set of learning outcomes. A child with severe disabilities may not achieve the same learning outcomes as other children but they do have precisely the same right to a quality education.

In **conclusion** the LMTF has been an influential actor over the past two years and there are some positive contributions that have been made but, perhaps unintentionally, there are also some serious limitations and problems with the outcomes to date. As we move towards setting a post-2015 development goal on education we need to have a much broader and more systematic process to build consensus on the future priorities – and it is extremely important that we do not end up with a narrowly framed goal on learning outcomes, based on the agendas of some dominant Northern voices. This would be to repeat the mistake of the past when a narrowly focused MDG on access to education undermined the more inclusive and collectively agreed EFA vision. We need a much more holistic goal which is consistent with human rights frameworks, promoting quality public education for all – and we need indicators that will balance quality inputs, quality processes and a broad range of quality outcomes.

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