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An agenda for learning

Realising the SDGs will require an emphasis on critical thinking in formal education, as well as continuous learning in day-to-day activities

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You'd have to be an incurable optimist to think that all the targets embodied within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be fully met by 2030. Yet it would be morally reprehensible not to take the goals seriously. Happily, there is growing evidence that this is already taking place, with some countries at least putting monitoring mechanisms in place to gauge progress and stimulate further development.

Whether sufficient progress is being made quickly enough is another matter – as is the question of whether the role of education

and learning is sufficiently understood. The work of Green Alliance in the UK illustrates the issues. A 2013 joint paper with Christian Aid, Greenpeace, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and WWF, under Green Alliance's non-governmental organisation (NGO) engagement theme, sets out four tests (policy emphases, really) for environmental resilience. The authors describe how these are essential for the post-2015 development framework to eradicate poverty and deliver long-term sustainable development. The four tests are to:

- support environmentally resilient poverty reduction, by building national and community capacity to respond to climate impacts and natural resource constraints;
- deliver resource efficiency and security, by building good resource management and sustainable resource use into national growth models, as well as increased transparency, access and rights for local communities;
- enable access to sustainable, secure, clean energy for all through economic growth models built on low-carbon, renewable energy sources and energy efficiency;
- reduce vulnerability to, and the impact of, disasters – and, in turn, reduce the need for humanitarian aid, while protecting lives, livelihoods and economic investments.

◀ Children being taught at an open-air school at the Gambiri Refugee Camp, Afghanistan. In 2014, 263 million children, adolescents and youth were out of school, the majority of whom resided in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia

The paper argues, plausibly, that this framework should apply to economically developed and developing countries. This would enable all nations to live within the planetary and social boundaries that are essential to long-term global sustainability.

While it has less to say about education, it seems hard to believe that the four tests will be effective without considerable education and learning. For example, if we are to build “national and community capacity to climate impacts and natural resource constraints” (as point one contends), this suggests we’ll need education of one sort or another. The word ‘build’ implies learning, and also features in points two and three (and is implicit in four). Thus, Green Alliance seems to be willing the end without thinking too much about the means. It is not alone in this.

Informal learning

The sort of learning that will be required if the SDGs are to be realised (and those four tests met) won’t just be what goes on in schools, colleges and universities – important though that is as a foundation for employment, further study and life. It will be the sort of learning that goes on day in, day out in the community, in government, in business and in NGOs – in fact in every place where initiatives related to the Global Goals are planned, developed, monitored and evaluated.

This is the sort of informal learning that is usually not considered learning at all, although it is. And, helpfully, it’s the kind of activity that isn’t hampered by top-down, expert-driven sets of pedagogical instruction or learning outcomes (such as UNESCO’s 255 learning outcomes for the SDGs) or by large educational bureaucracies.

It is not just NGOs such as Green Alliance that are taking the SDGs seriously; companies are too. This is, in part at least, because they know that working towards the goals can be good for business, just as business can be good for development. A

recent report from the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership called *Towards a sustainable economy: The commercial imperative for business to deliver the UN Sustainable Development Goals* illustrates the issues.

The report makes the case that taking the SDGs seriously constitutes the equivalent of a licence to operate in the 21st century. It argues that there are robust commercial incentives to see the goals succeed and for business to help deliver them. It advocates a holistic approach, whereby the SDGs are presented as a vision for the future of business in society. This vision would be capable of inspiring interest and creativity, identifying opportunities for future growth, and framing strategies for difficult trade-offs and problem-solving.

Just like the Green Alliance report, however, this document also has little to say

do. Conversations also tend to default to the assumption that teaching of some sort always precedes learning. But this is not a helpful calculus. Learning accrues from all kinds of experiences and activities, and can go on all the time. That said, it would be unhelpful to end this article without some consideration of the more formal foundational learning referred to above.

Schools are charged with the initial education of the young. They have a particular responsibility in nurturing thinking and learning about what might constitute appropriate futures, and in helping students begin to develop skills and competences by doing so. It’s no surprise, then, that international testing focuses on science, maths and reading, not on sustainability skills or competence. But Andrew Stables, a professor of education and philosophy at

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about education. It does acknowledge the need for learning, although it spends little time exploring the implications of this for business practice. There is also much that is implicit at best and subliminal at worst.

That said, it is a rich document for anyone thinking about the Global Goals in a real-world context. Section 2.1, for example, sets out a 10-year plan to lay the foundations of a sustainable economy that is capable of delivering the SDGs. It outlines 10 interconnected tasks that target the systemic changes required across government, finance and business, including businesses’ role in enabling the structural and cultural transformations needed. There are ideas here that anyone wishing to focus on the goals will surely find of interest, especially if they compare them with Kate Raworth’s *Doughnut Economics*, and the recent ‘wedding cake model’ of the SDGs from the Stockholm Resilience Centre.

Of course, the reason why NGOs and businesses find it hard to think and talk about learning is that it’s not always easy to

the University of Roehampton, argues that school students are only ever likely to pick up a general and diffuse sense of concern about the world’s problems. He says that such skills can only really be fully developed through practice in realistic contexts. So it’s unhelpful to think of skills and competences ever being fully developed by a particular stage (although we do find endless lists of such skills and competences for school and higher education students to develop).

Because of all this, Stables says, the school curriculum should focus on the development of skills of critical thinking, dialogue and discussion/debate. These might be critical questions about society (easy), their own learning (harder), or their school (risky). Through this, young people would be enabled, should they choose, to play an increasing role in society and in transformative social change of all kinds.

In emphasising this role for the school, Stables privileges the development of skills above content. He also stresses the iterative nature of learning, participation

and decision-making. But schools are most successful, perhaps, when they combine these elements. Paul Vare and I have argued that it's helpful to think of two complementary approaches:

1. Building students' capacity to think critically and develop abilities to make sound choices in the face of the inherent complexity and uncertainty. This will tend to be dialogue and debate oriented, and focused on controversial issues.

2. Providing guidance about behaviours, shifts in habit, and ways of thinking about how we live. This will tend to be content focused, data based, and grounded in everyday practice.

Schools seem to find it easier to do the second than the first, but both are important.

Finally, in relation to the SDGs, it seems persuasive that schools should:

- help learners understand why the goals ought to be of concern to them;
- enable learners to gain plural perspectives from a range of viewpoints;
- provide opportunities for an active, critical exploration of issues;
- encourage learners to come to their own views, and to get involved.

Doing less than this seems neglectful, but doing much more always runs the risk of indoctrination.

This is, of course, a liberal educational view that prioritises student learning over institutional, behaviour or social change, while making use of any change that's happening to support and broaden that learning. In this sense, it's fine for a school to encourage its students to explore the SDGs and get involved. If this enhances social justice, saves energy, creates less waste, promotes biodiversity, and so on, that's all to the good. But it can't be the purpose of a school to solve the problems of society or to improve the world through students' activities.

The crucial factor must always be what students learn by participating in such activities; because learners never learn what teachers teach, this will not necessarily be what those in authority desire.

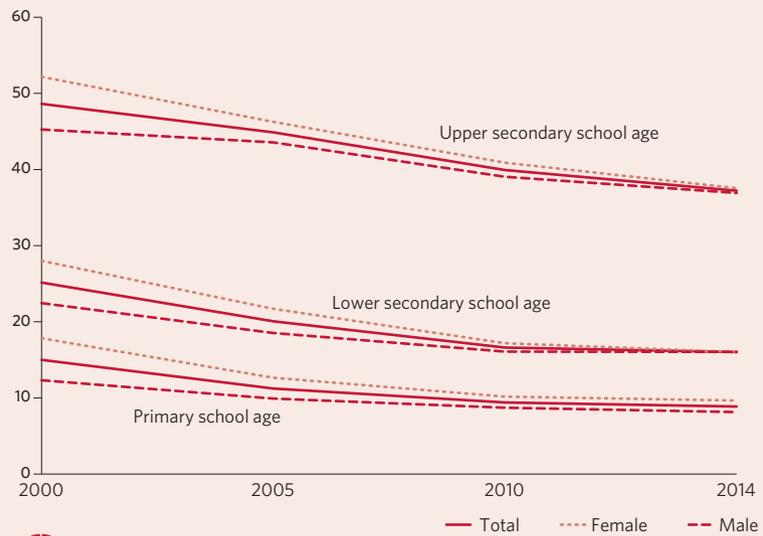
So is education the key to everything? Probably not. But learning certainly is. ●

4 QUALITY EDUCATION



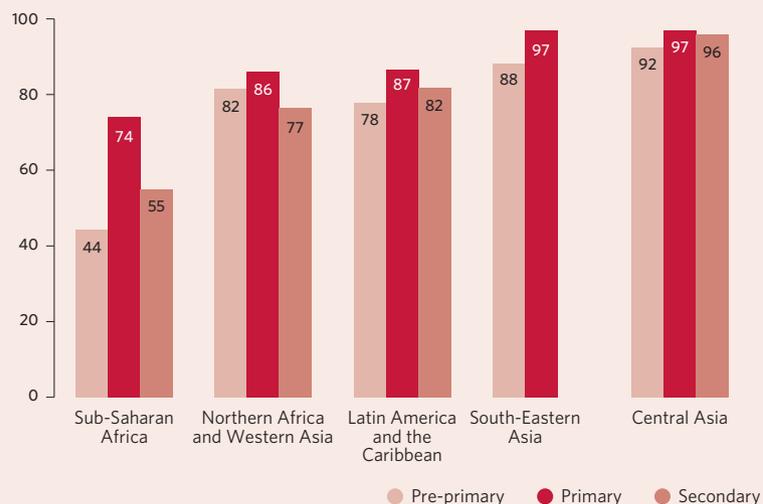
Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Proportion of school-aged children out of school worldwide, by level of education and sex, 2000-2014 (percentage)



Despite progress in enrolment, more than a quarter of a billion school-aged children, adolescents and youth are not in school

Proportion of trained teachers at each education level, 2011 or latest available data (percentage)



Lack of trained teachers and adequate facilities threatens quality education for all, especially in sub-Saharan Africa

Source: The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2017, United Nations