

Conference GCE-NL

Education for All 2000-2030: Achievements and challenges for North and South

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2015 is a crucial year. Worldwide, everyone who is professionally connected to education, must take stock of the situation in their sector. In 2000, the world leaders pledged that 15 years later, in 2015, the universal right to education would be realised. The UN Millennium Development Goals and the Education for All (EFA) Goals were the translation of these pledges. We are now in 2015, it is time to evaluate what has been achieved, and which steps are needed for the future. The EFA Global Monitoring Report 2015 is the mark by which all progress and lack of progress is measured. In the Netherlands, the report was launched on 23 April, during the conference 'Education for All 2000-2030: achievements and challenges for North and South'. The meeting was organised by the Dutch chapter of the Global Campaign for Education.

A year of crossroads

"2015 is a year of crossroads, in which the Millennium Development Goals and EFA Goals are ending and new goals are approaching," said Kees de Jong, director of Edukans Foundation, in his opening speech. He pointed out that while education is the key building stone of sustainable development, the Dutch government is steadily diminishing its development cooperation budget for education. In 2009 spending amounted to over 500 million euro's yearly, the budget now is 80 million annually, and is still decreasing. He called on those present to take action and to 'reframe' education, in order to convince the public sector of the importance of education for development.

Kees de Jong pointed out that while most governments agree on the importance of education, when it comes to funding, this importance appears to be less clear-cut. Middle-income countries certainly can be expected to make a substantial financial contribution to their education sector. But "there is no way the poorest countries can provide sufficient funding. They need foreign support."

Bridging the gap

In May of this year, the World Education Forum will be held in South Korea, where the new education goals for 2030 will be set. The participating countries will also discuss the role of education within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 which will be determined by the UN later this year. The international community aims for a stand-alone goal on education to be incorporated into the SDGs: to ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. Kees de Jong: "This new goal does not only concern developing countries, but it should bridge the gap between those countries and the West." The South and the West are facing similar issues, such as refugees seeking shelter in their country, how to deal with inequality and radicalisation, and the importance to involve teachers, who are experts in the day-to-day challenges in the classroom, in the current debate on education. Industrialised countries and developing countries should therefore seek answers to those issues together.

Mixed image

The Global Monitoring Report (GMR) 2015 is a final assessment of the progress made for the six EFA goals. The report offers a mixed image, said Priyadarshani Joshi, research officer for this year's GMR. The most important conclusion is that the world did not achieve education for all during the EFA time frame: 121 million children and adolescents were still out of school in 2012. The poorest children continue to be the most vulnerable target group; they are four times more likely to be out of school than the richest children and five times more likely not to finish primary school. The poorest children, together with other marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities, children living in conflict areas and working children, are most affected by the failure to realize the right to universal education.

Nevertheless, Priyadarshani Joshi stressed, significant achievements have been made as well. Since 2000, there are 84 million fewer children and adolescents out of school, and two-thirds more children are enrolled in pre-primary education. Of the six EFA goals, the goal to boost adult literacy was neglected, she stated. Only a quarter of the countries brought their adult illiteracy rates down by 50%, while of the 781 million adults who lack literacy skills, two-thirds remain women. She also highlighted the goal to achieve gender equality, which is characterised by progress. The achievements, however, are uneven and varied. Two thirds of the countries reached gender parity in primary education, and under half of the countries reached this goal in secondary education.

4.5 Days of military spending

Funding continues to be a major concern, Priyadarshani Joshi said. While during 2000-2015 many low income countries increased their spending on education, only half of them spent the recommended 4% of GNP. Funding by international donors, including governments in industrialised countries, decreased by 1.3 billion US dollars between 2010 and 2012. The sad conclusion is, she stressed, that the international donors failed to live up to their commitments. For every child in low and lower middle income countries to benefit from an expanded basic education of good quality by 2030, there is an annual external funding gap of US\$ 22 billion. While this seems an enormous amount of money, a different perspective is possible: this sum is the equivalent of just 4.5 days of military spending.

The important question is how to move forward after 2015. It is clear that financing is a crucial element. The UNESCO recommends that governments ensure that 15-20% of national budgets are spent on education and that finance targets for education are established within the sustainable development goals. Also, it should be recognised by the international community that education plays a pivotal role in achieving sustainable development: from gender equality and healthy families to sustainable consumption and peaceful societies. And finally, the new post 2015 education targets need to prioritise equity and quality.

The reality of the classroom

“We should not forget to bring the reality of the classroom into this debate,” said Jefferson Pessi of Education International, the global federation of education workers’ unions. Stressing that the voice of the teachers should be heard, for they are the ones who know the needs and experiences in the workplace, he presented the outcome of a global survey among education workers in 105 countries. One of striking findings was that while countries committed themselves to the EFA goals, many of them did not follow up with a financial commitment. Many countries actually decreased their funding after 2000 (e.g. Bangladesh, Sierra Leone) or kept their education budgets at the same level (e.g. Cambodia, Guinea, Peru). Some adopted new education laws, but failed to make a matching budget available (e.g. India). Also, most countries took years to develop their EFA plan, which meant that they started implementing those plans long after 2000.

Also, funding in many cases came in too late or was spent on matters such as management and administration rather than on the teaching itself. “Frequently, we see a disconnection between the reality schools are facing and where the money is going,” Jefferson Pessi said. He warned the international community that the time, money and energy spent on defining the post 2015 education goals, could be wasted if it turns out that sufficient funds are lacking.

Education International has formulated a set of recommendations, based on the results of the survey: know the system better - know the needs and expectations on the work floor and incorporate them in the education goals; invest more and better; and communicate better in the sense of building a shared vision and creating a sense of ownership among all stakeholders, including the teachers.

Panel discussion

In the ensuing panel discussion Jefferson Pessi, Priyadarshani Joshi, Jan Berkvens (Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development) and Frits Brouwer (Dutch Youth Representative to UNESCO) participated. The panel discussed, among others, the issue of quality, how can this be defined? Members of the audience stressed that the context in which quality is realised should be taken into

account. Quality in an isolated rural area for instance, could mean something different than in an urban region. Quality is related to improving the quality of life, and the way in which this is achieved may vary. Jefferson Pessi agreed that quality has to be decided at a local level, not at a global level. Teachers should share a vision of what education should be, of what is working and what is not working.

The audience commented that the voice of children was not sufficiently included in the EFA report and in the development of new goals. Jan Berkvens reacted by saying that children should be given more responsibility, their capacities are often underestimated. Frits Brouwer stated that we often talk about children, but should rather talk with children.

Intellectual partner

The plenary session was followed by a session in which the participants of the conference attended one of five workshops on: the teachers' perspective; the role of education in refugee integration, education and radicalisation; education and inequality and the quality of education.

After a brief presentation of the issues discussed during the workshops, Ruerd Ruben presented a spoken column. Ruben is former director of the Dutch Policy and Operations Department (IOB) and was professor in Development Effectiveness at the Centre for International Development Issues (CIDIN) at Radboud University. He currently is professor of food security, value chains and impact assessment at LEI-Wageningen University. Ruerd Ruben also participated in the Dutch government's evaluation of education aid: 'Education Matters: Policy review of the Dutch contribution to basic education 1999-2009'. "This was a strange experience," he said. "While our research found that Dutch education aid had been effective, the junior minister for Development Cooperation decided to stop that aid." Over time, however, Ruerd Ruben came to the conclusion that the junior minister had been right. He pointed out that there is no sector where more information is available on what has been achieved than the education sector. "We can determine fairly well what works and what doesn't work." And while there remains a lot to be done in education, especially in terms of quality and access, the small interventions often yield most. As an example, he mentioned the building of separate toilets for girls and boys in schools, which increases girls' attendance in schools.

Ruerd Ruben also addressed the matter of funding. Research shows that in 50 African countries, donor aid constitutes 5% of the education budget, while the local government is responsible for 45% and parents for 50% of the budget (the latter in the form of e.g. school uniforms, books, etc.). "International aid obviously is a tiny thing," he said. "If local government funding increases, for instance, this would have a much greater impact." The role of the West, therefore, he stressed, is to be creative. "We should be an intellectual partner, and the challenge is not to think about the supply of education, but to come up with ways to increase the demand for education."

Note: Bram van Ojik (leader of Dutch political party GroenLinks, Itaf al Awadeh (Save the Children Jordan) and Anusheh Bakht Aziz (Youth Advocacy Group of the UN Global Education First Initiative) for varying reasons were unable to speak at the conference.

Report by Annet Zeelenberg