



## Sustainable Development Begins with Education

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić<sup>1</sup> and Sir John Daniel<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Formerly Chief of Section, Higher Education, UNESCO, Paris*

<sup>2</sup>*Formerly Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO, Paris*

**Abstract:** This article builds on the report of a meeting of the Memory and Future Club of the Association of Former UNESCO Staff Members held in February 2016 to discuss the impact of UNESCO's work on Education for All. It also derives from the authors' personal perspectives on the important contribution that the EFA campaign has made and could make to the overall goal of making education a vehicle for the sustainable development of our world. We celebrate its successes and explore its challenges.

**Keywords:** Sustainable development, education, Goal 4

### Introduction

In February 2016 the Memory and Future Club of the Association of Former UNESCO Staff Members organised a session with the title *Sustainable Development Begins with Education* as part of its ongoing series of discussion forums on the impact of UNESCO's work. One of the authors (Uvalić-Trumbić) helped to organise this event with Neda Ferrier and the other (Daniel) was one of the three speakers. The main focus of the meeting was UNESCO's contribution to the campaign to achieve Education for All (EFA) and, in keeping with the club's name, Memory and Future, it brought together three speakers who, between them, could give a perspective on the past, an account of current activities and a taste of the future.

Sir John Daniel took up the story from the inception of the EFA campaign at the Jomtien conference in 1990 and reported on its progress until his departure from UNESCO in 2004. Sabine Detzel, a member of UNESCO's former EFA Coordinating Team, then gave an overview of the progress that EFA made from mid-2000 to 2015. Finally Jean-Yves Le Saux, Deputy Director of UNESCO's Bureau for Strategic Planning, took up the challenging task of shedding light on the future of Education Agenda 2030, which is the target date for the Sustainable Development Goals that were agreed upon at the UN in September 2015. Goal 4, Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong opportunities for all, focuses on Education, based on the targets set by the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action, adopted in May 2015.

Although it builds on the report of the meeting (Khawajkie, 2016) this article also derives from the authors' personal perspectives on the important contribution that the EFA campaign has made and could make to the overall goal of making education a vehicle for the sustainable development of our world. We celebrate its successes and explore its challenges.



## **The Early Years**

The commitment to 'full and equal opportunities for education for all' goes back to UNESCO's constitution. The discussion took as its starting point, however, the Conference on Education for All that convened in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990.

The Jomtien conference was convened because in 1985 some 105 million children aged between six and eleven, the majority of them girls, were not in school. Forecasts suggested that this number could double to 200 million by 2000. The purpose of the Jomtien conference was to stimulate a new and broader vision of basic education. It led to the adoption, by 155 governments, 33 intergovernmental bodies and 125 NGOs, of a set of six targets to be reached by 2000 (UNESCO, 1990).

These targets were not achieved. Indeed, in absolute terms the world went backwards during the 1990s. In 1990 100 million children were not in school and by 2000 this had grown to 125 million. There were various reasons for this failure. The 1990s were a turbulent decade and several factors moved the goalposts out of reach (Daniel, 2010, p. 10).

Accordingly, a new conference on Education for All was convened in Dakar in 2000. It also set six goals, this time with the target of 2015. Abhimanyu Singh from India, who subsequently played a key role in supporting UNESCO's follow-up to Dakar, was the rapporteur (UNESCO, 2000).

The World Bank's background documents for the Dakar conference reveal that it expected to be designated as the lead body for the implementation of the Dakar Framework for Action. In the event, however, thanks to some fast footwork by UNESCO's incoming Director-General, Koïchiro Matsuura, UNESCO was asked to take on this role.

There was, however, an important consolation prize for the World Bank, which was given the coordinating role for pursuing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were approved at the UN Millennium Summit later that same year (United Nations, 2000).

Prior to the Dakar conference relationships between the major international agencies such as UNESCO, UNDP, UNICEF and the World Bank were pretty poisonous, full of petty rivalries and backbiting. But it was clear that they would all have to work together on the EFA agenda and they embarked on the task with goodwill, thanks in part to new senior appointments in each organisation. This was especially true of UNESCO and the World Bank.

The MDGs included shorter versions of two of the six Dakar goals, achieving Universal Primary Education and eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education. Naturally the World Bank focused its efforts and funds on those two goals. At first UNESCO regretted that the other four Dakar goals had been essentially set to one side, but those involved in the campaign quickly realised that if the agencies were to improve on the world's performance after Jomtien they needed to be pragmatic and concentrate on the essentials.

One manifestation of this tighter focus was the Fast-Track Initiative (later known as the Global Partnership for Education), launched at the Development Committee of the World Bank in 2002 with the aim of providing concentrated support to complete the task of achieving the quantifiable EFA

goals in countries where conditions were judged to be propitious (World Bank, 2016). This led to some very productive and convivial meetings. Education Minister Jeffries from Guyana once remarking that to use the word 'fast' in connection with anything involving the World Bank was an oxymoron!

But the alliance between the World Bank and UNESCO worked well. The Bank had the money but the developing countries regarded UNESCO as 'their' agency, which gave credibility to their joint decisions.

It was also enormously helpful that UNESCO was given the funds, mainly by DFID, the UK's international development agency, to publish the annual Global Monitoring Reports on EFA (UNESCO, 2015a). There's a saying that 'if you can't measure it, you can't manage it'. Having this intellectually powerful group hold a mirror up to the joint efforts added to the sense of purpose that developed over the decade.

UNESCO can be proud that the EFA campaign made much faster progress in the 2000s than it had in the 1990s. But there was still a large unfinished agenda. For example, the 2009 Global Monitoring Report commented: "progress towards the EFA goals is being undermined by the failure of governments to tackle persistent inequalities based on income, location, gender, ethnicity, language, disability and other markers of disadvantage".

A fuller account of the progress of the EFA campaign up to about 2009 can be found in *Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All* (Daniel, 2010, pp. 1-24).

## **Current Challenges**

Sabine Detzel recalled that the EFA campaign hit a rough patch towards the end of the decade of the 2000s. UNESCO's leadership of the process weakened and EFA mid-term reviews showed that progress had stagnated. The other players asked UNESCO to "enhance the effectiveness of the EFA coordination architecture" and the year 2010 became a turning point. In February 2010 the Declaration of the 9<sup>th</sup> High Level Group Meeting on EFA called for stronger EFA coordination, a more effective structure and better results (UNESCO, 2010). This led to significant reform in 2011, aimed primarily at re-establishing links to the national level in parallel with regional consultations. This brought all EFA partners around one table, revamped the advocacy and communication strategies and challenged the tight focus on the MDGs by promoting EFA as a holistic and universal agenda for education. This reform helped to bridge the artificial divide between Member States and donors that had widened over previous years.

It also laid the groundwork for the National EFA 2015 Reviews and the consultation process for post-2015, which some called the "last big push" for EFA (UNESCO, 2015b). This re-emphasised the full EFA agenda and its universality, partly because by this time equity and quality were salient issues for all states, not just developing countries. Determined not to lay down again the parallel tracks between the MDGs and EFA that had vitiated some of the previous work, the partners tasked UNESCO to ensure that there was a single agenda.

This set the context for the Incheon Conference, held in May 2015 after the customary regional consultations (UNESCO, 2015c). Its major challenge was to align the Education agenda with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) before the articulation of the SDGs themselves. The earlier

thematic consultations had revealed that primary education was no longer the key issue for all countries - skills and economic growth were emerging as vital concerns. At Incheon UNESCO was able to achieve agreement that there should be just one overarching education goal, which the UN gradually took up in New York as SDG Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015b). This gave UNESCO a common objective to which all parts of its Education Sector could contribute actively.

## **The Future**

Looking towards that future Jean-Yves Le Saux put the SDGs in the broader perspective of Agenda 2030, adopted by the UN in New York in September 2015, with its 17 objectives (goals) and 169 targets (United Nations, 2015). Reflecting the gradual evolution of the processes of international concentration on EFA since the Dakar Conference, the implementation of these goals will rely more on intergovernmental processes than on international agencies. He admitted that statistical indicators to measure performance against the goals had still to be developed and that, even more fundamentally, there was no global initiative for financing the work required to achieve the goals.

Against this, however, the holistic nature of the SDGs and the greater emphasis on intergovernmental cooperation provides some grounds for hope. Hindsight shows that the campaigns for EFA and the MDGs were becoming too compartmentalised. Indeed, after the Dakar Conference some governments set up special units for achieving EFA outside their education ministries!

This holistic approach of the SDGs may be helpful for governmental planning as well as for coordinating work within UNESCO. In the latter case the SDGs include agendas for all UNESCO's sectors, with targets relating to oceans, freshwater, biodiversity, culture in urban settings and media, as well as education. UNESCO is articulating this programme in its 38C/7 planning document for 2016-2017 and will take on a coordinating role in several areas while seeking funds to implement the work.

The proof of the pudding will, of course, be in the eating. The measure of the success of the SDGs will be whether the goal Education 2030: 'Towards equitable quality education and lifelong education for all' is substantially achieved by 2030 and how far the overall development agenda has progressed by that date.

## **Conclusion**

We make three comments in conclusion.

First, the convergence within the campaign for education for all is an encouraging development. The UN declared a Decade for Education for Sustainable Development from 2005-2014. When UNESCO came to a decision about what was meant by 'education for sustainable development' it quickly concluded that it goes well beyond education for environmental awareness to embrace all aspects of learning for development - with the proviso that such development must be sustainable.

Second, probably the strongest direct link between education and sustainable development is the secondary education of girls. Women with secondary education have, on average, 1.5 fewer children than those with only primary schooling. Even a one-child difference per woman represents 3 billion more or fewer people on the planet by the middle of the century. Limiting population growth is the most promising way of limiting climate change (Cohen, 2008).

Finally, the EFA campaign has always tried to rise above any purely utilitarian understanding of the importance of education. We cannot express this better than Nelson Mandela, who once said: 'there can be no contentment for any of us when there are children, millions of children, who do not receive an education that provides them with dignity and honour and allows them to lead their lives to the full'.

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**Authors**

**Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić** is formerly Chief of Section, Higher Education, UNESCO, Paris. Email: suvalictrumbic@gmail.com

**Sir John Daniel** is formerly President and CEO of Commonwealth of Learning, and former Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO, Paris. Email: odlsirjohn@gmail.com