

Ed

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Education in SDG 2030

The challenges ahead

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Heads of states or governments of the world will meet at the United Nations headquarters in New York on September 25-27 to proclaim a new global agenda for sustainable development to be realised by 2030 (SDG 2030), replacing the Millennium Development Goals (MDG 2015), which was adopted 15 years ago at a UN Summit.

The scope of the new ambitious agenda is breathtaking. “We resolve, between now and 2030, to end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and to ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources,” says the draft sent by UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon to the special session of the General Assembly for its consideration.

The Bangladesh delegation will be led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who will address the special UN assembly. The agenda has been painstakingly negotiated over a period of two years by a so-called Open Working Group, consisting of representatives of member countries, UN agencies, international development NGOs and selected academic experts. The high-level national delegations are expected to endorse later this month the document as presented, rather than suggest changes and re-open the debate at this stage.

Ambassador A.K. Abdul Momen, Bangladesh's Permanent Representative to UN, said, “Bangladesh can be reasonably happy with the document, because our point of view reflecting that of a low income developing country has been largely incorporated in the draft.”

Seventeen sustainable development goals, elaborated into as many as 169 targets, have been proposed. The Millennium Development Goals with eight major goals had provided a framework for development in 2000. Progress has been made on many of the MDGs worldwide and by Bangladesh, especially in reducing the proportions of population in abject poverty, reducing child and maternal mortality, and bringing both boys and girls into primary school.

However, expected success was not achieved in keeping all children in primary school, or ensuring that they achieved the required skills and competencies. One out of five children still drop out before reaching class five. Four out of ten youth over 15 and adults remain illiterate.

The SDG 2030 goals are about ending poverty and hunger, ensuring health and education for all, achieving gender equality, sustainable management of water and soil, energy for all, and promoting sustainable economic growth and “decent work.” Resilient infrastructure and sustainable industrialisation are aimed for, as is the reduction of inequality among and in countries, and revitalising global partnerships for sustainable development.

Proposed as the overarching goal for education among the 17 SDGs, Goal 4 reads simply as to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all.” This education and learning goal embraces a broad agenda for human empowerment and capability enhancement. Quality and equity in education, the right to education, and learning as a lifelong process are embedded in this goal.

This overall goal is elaborated into seven targets related to various sub-areas of education, ranging from early childhood development, primary and secondary education, skills development, literacy and adult education to combating gender and other disparities. This broad vision of education contrasts sharply with MDG education agenda which narrowly focused on primary education and removing gender disparity.

How relevant are the SDG agenda and the education part of this agenda for Bangladesh? How can Bangladesh use it to serve its own priorities? The short answer is that the global agenda is a framework for designing the national agenda and thus, can be reference points for benchmarking and assessing the national development effort.

The broader vision of education is clearly germane to the development vision 2021 of Bangladesh and the aim of reaching the status of a middle income nation in all its dimensions of human well-being and human dignity, rather than just in terms of average per capita income. The broad education agenda with a focus on quality, equity and lifelong learning is also vitally important for the total SDG agenda.

An opportunity is presented by the SDG agenda, especially SDG 4, to formulate a national action framework that reconciles global and national targets and indicators of progress in education. A review of progress and shortcomings in respect to EFA 2015 in Bangladesh, conducted under the government and UNESCO, points to the key elements which should find a place in an Education 2030 national action framework.

The trend of decline in public resources for education in recent years, already one of the lowest among countries as a proportion of GDP and government budgets, must be reversed -- even as we demand higher levels of international assistance which must support a coordinated national effort.

New thinking needs to guide ways of attracting, preparing and supporting teachers at all levels of education, raising their performance, morale and status. There cannot be acceptable quality in the education system as long as teaching is the last occupational choice for young people.

The highly centralised governance and management of education with some 150,000 institutions, 40 million learners and 1.5 million teachers need to be transformed to promote greater

accountability, authority and transparency in institutions and at the local level. Corruption, waste and mismanagement, aided and abetted by oligarchic politics, have to be brought under rein.

Unique to Bangladesh is the segmentation of school education under two ministries, creating many problems of coordination, continuity and application of standards and causing confusion among international agencies about who they need to deal with as the national counterpart. A logical solution would be to bring school education and basic education under one ministry, with tertiary education in a separate ministry.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the UN Summit on SDG will deservedly be applauded for achievement and efforts in MDG. SDG and Education 2030 will call for a higher level of political will and focused efforts.

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