



Extract from the report:

Spotlight on
Global Multilateralism

Perspectives on the future
of international cooperation
in times of multiple crises

Preparing the global ground for transforming education systems

BY ANTONIA WULFF

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With the launch of the UN Secretary-General's report *Our Common Agenda* in September 2021 came a long overdue and somewhat unexpected endorsement of education as one of the big global issues. The COVID-19 pandemic had a disastrous impact on and in education systems, hitting already underfunded and overburdened public systems, and affecting millions of already marginalized children, young people and communities. In response, the UN Secretary-General convened the first-ever summit at the level of Heads of State devoted to education. The aim was to get the world back on track towards the goal of quality education for all but also to jumpstart the necessary transformation of education systems. The summit fell short of expectations but did provide an opening to address some systemic challenges. The question now is what happens next, and whether the global governance of the education sector and the multilateral system more broadly can address the changes required of governments and of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs).

Considering the context: underfunded and overburdened education systems

We are now officially halfway to the deadline to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A deadline that seemed so far off is around the corner – and before we know it, our energy will shift towards a post-2030 process. As has been stated time and time again, we are lagging far behind on the 17 Goals.

In the education sector, it is not even a matter of lagging behind: in the last couple of years, we have seen a regression, with key indicators moving in the wrong direction.¹ This is of course in part a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced schools and education institutions to close down in 194 countries, affecting 1.6 billion students. School closures at such a scale were unprecedented and no system was prepared for the sudden shift to remote teaching and learning.

However, today's situation is not caused solely by the pandemic. It is about broader developments in the governance and financing of public services more generally, and in education more specifically, which were brought to the fore and aggravated by the pandemic.

Education is an age-old development priority. Over the years, it has moved from being an exclusive privilege to being recognized as a human right. Governments committed to universal primary education through the Education for All agenda and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and most recently, to ensuring universal completion of primary and secondary education through the adoption of SDG 4.

As governments have been under pressure to expand access, education systems have found themselves catering to an ever-growing number of students, often without the required increase in investment and staff. Concurrently, there has been a shift in terms of how governments and their role are perceived and positioned, with emphasis increasingly placed on the limits of government – whether in an

1 UNESCO/UNICEF/World Bank (2021)

ideological push for small government or framed as a more pragmatic consequence of constrained fiscal space. As public budgets have shrunk, many governments have encouraged and facilitated the participation of private actors.

Public authorities should determine how education is organized and its quality ensured. This is also in line with the human rights framework: governments are responsible for ensuring the right to education. While SDG 4 links the goal of universal completion of free primary and secondary education to issues of equity and inclusion, it doesn't address the fact that this requires public investment.

This failure, of course, goes beyond SDG 4. In reality, the blurred lines between public and private actors cut across the 2030 Agenda. Not only is the accountability framework toothless, it also fails to distinguish between the different roles and responsibilities of actors. Governments are only mentioned a few times in the 2030 Agenda and are, in most cases, listed as one of many in a broader global partnership, followed by the private sector, civil society, the UN system and other actors. The only areas where governments are to be in charge are in the follow-up, review and setting of national targets.

What this leads to is a situation in which all actors are cast as equally important and all implementation equally good: as long as children are in school and scoring well on tests, it is irrelevant how and by whom education is provided and paid for. Yet, these are the policy choices that determine whether an education system is truly equitable, inclusive and of quality. And, these are the policy choices that make up a social contract.

A new attempt at the global governance of education

When SDG 4 was agreed, the global education sector had long experience to draw upon, with the Education for All agenda dating back to 1990. In 2015, the education sector had a governance structure, a blueprint for SDG 4 implementation, the SDG 4-Education 2030 Framework for Action, and a set of thematic indicators for monitoring progress.

Yet, implementation was slow and the perceived marginalization of education was a source of constant concern within the sector: “a key development outcome, but with limited attention from political leadership and investors”, as it was put by a high-level UNESCO official in a meeting recently. The dramatic impact of the pandemic has now given a new impetus to the longstanding discussion on the shortcomings of global education coordination. In the wake of COVID-19, UNESCO launched a multistakeholder process to design a new mechanism for overseeing and guiding SDG 4 implementation. The new SDG 4-Education 2030 High Level Steering Committee (HLSC) was subsequently established in November 2021, designed to provide political leadership on global education priorities and create stronger accountability incentives. It has a leadership group with Ministerial representation, led by the President of Sierra Leone and the Director-General of UNESCO, and a more technical sherpa group. Member State representation is rotational, with two states per region being elected for a two-year period. Each region is also represented by a regional organization. The other stakeholders with a dedicated seat are UNICEF; the World Bank; the OECD; the Global Partnership for Education; donors; civil society; teachers' organizations and a shared seat for foundations and the private sector, and youth and students, respectively.²

It is too early to tell whether this new mechanism will deliver on its mandate, also given the singular focus to date on the preparations and follow-up to the Transforming Education Summit (TES). But there is certainly strong commitment to making the mechanism work, and the high-level political representation has the potential to bring about a new form of ownership and engagement from Member States.

Towards a renewed global commitment: the Transforming Education Summit

The COVID-19 pandemic and its deep impact on education systems ended up showcasing the central role of education in the lives of people – and in a number of different development outcomes. It revealed that

2 For more information, see <https://www.sdg4education2030.org/hlsc>

education is a lifeline, without which some of the most vulnerable children and young people lose out on access to nutrition, basic health care and social interaction and care, and are at direct risk of child labour and child marriage. Many of the children affected will never return to school.

This alarming situation elevated concerns that we in the sector have long had over the equity, inclusion and quality of education, as evidenced by the UN Secretary-General in his policy brief *Education in the time of COVID-19 and beyond* published a couple of months into the pandemic, in which he called on governments to address the unequal consequences of school closures and protect education budgets.³ In *Our Common Agenda*,⁴ the Secretary-General took this further by announcing his intention to convene a Transforming Education Summit (TES) to accelerate progress towards SDG 4 and help orient education systems towards the future.

The process was ambitious: built around five thematic priorities – equity and inclusion; skills for life and work; teachers; digitalization; and financing – the Summit was to have three different outcomes. These were: national commitments by governments; a vision statement of the Secretary-General; and a number of spotlight initiatives. In addition to global thematic consultations, governments were asked to convene national consultations.

Preceded by a three-day Pre-Summit hosted by UNESCO in June 2022, the Summit was subsequently held over three days in conjunction with the UN General Assembly in September 2022. A total of 131 governments submitted National Statements of Commitment, and while these did not share a common format, some trends can be observed:⁵ 123 countries committed to making education more equitable and inclusive, 102 to supporting the digitalization of education, 81 to improving teacher training, 66 to making curriculum reforms, and 49 to measures related

to post-pandemic recovery. However, these broad themes mask hugely divergent ambitions: supporting digitalization ranges from investing in infrastructure and internet connectivity to establishing new online platforms and training teachers. It is also hard to determine whether a commitment presented at TES is a new commitment, or just a reassertion of existing policy or ambitions.

While the lack of a negotiated outcome document allowed for a more ambitious vision statement, with an emphasis on education as a right and public good, equity and inclusion, and public investment, it is unclear in what ways it will be used – if at all.⁶ The spotlight initiatives, in turn, are partly linked to the five priority areas and are led mostly by UN agencies. Specific follow-up actions related to teachers were one of the main demands of Education International, and we were very pleased with the last-minute inclusion of an initiative focused on teachers.

A broader approach to education financing

One area in which TES has the potential to move the needle is financing. With two thirds of low and lower-middle income countries having cut their education budgets since the start of the pandemic,⁷ a third of the poorest countries spending more on debt servicing than on education,⁸ and 85 percent of the world's population expected to live under austerity in 2023,⁹ education budgets are under real pressure.

Approximately one third of the 131 countries made a commitment to increase public investment in education, using the official SDG 4 benchmarks of 4-6 percent of GDP and 15-20 percent of public expenditure. However, almost a quarter of countries pledged to increase the participation of the private sector. The great majority of these countries are low-income countries. What this means more concretely is an increase in public-private partnerships, particularly in vocational education and training; development

3 UN (2020)

4 UN Secretary-General (2021)

5 All currently available national statements are found here: <https://www.un.org/en/transforming-education-summit/member-states-statements>

6 UN Transforming Education Summit (2022)

7 UNESCO/World Bank (2021)

8 Save the Children (2022)

9 Ortiz/Cummings (2022)

projects; and digitalization efforts. Some also mention the need for increased incentives for private sector participation.

At the same time, the Call to Action on Educational Investment represents an important step in terms of the education sector finally recognizing the systemic issues underpinning education financing.¹⁰ The 2021 Paris Declaration¹¹ had already placed education financing in the broader context of domestic resource mobilization, but this goes further by calling for “ambitious and progressive tax reforms”, nationally as well as internationally; and “action on debt relief, restructuring and in some cases, cancellation, for any country spending more on debt servicing than education”. What is remarkable here is that there is no reference to private actors or the usual praise of the role and the contribution of the private sector. Focus is firmly on increasing fiscal space for education.

Importantly, the Call to Action also urges the International Monetary Fund (IMF) “to remove obstacles such as public sector wage bill constraints that prevent increased spending on education,” even if the IMF itself declined the invitation to attend the Summit. The practice of coercive policy advice to governments to either cut or freeze public sector wage bills directly undermines efforts to achieve SDG 4, particularly given the dramatic shortage of qualified teachers.¹² A number of speakers at the Summit called on the IMF to come to the table and to stop undermining public education systems. The Education 2030 High Level Steering Committee (HLSC) has already requested a special session on education at the Spring meetings of the IMF and the World Bank in 2023.

The Call to Action also gives the HLSC a mandate to discuss systemic issues, which is particularly interesting given its new composition with ministerial representation. Indeed, the HLSC meeting in late 2022 included a minister reflecting on the experience of negotiating with the IMF and dealing with their bias

against public education. The World Bank already has a seat at the table and we look forward to them joining this conversation too.

What next?

While the Transforming Education Summit did not result in any new money or decisive actions, it signalled to governments that the crises in education are urgent and require governmental responses – and that is the kind of leadership that should be exercised by the UN. It placed financing at the centre of this response, and called on governments to invest more in education, flagging the scale of both the funding gap and its adverse impacts. Importantly, it placed education financing in a broader systemic context, connecting it to issues of tax, debt, aid and the policies of the IFIs, thereby opening up a new avenue to pursue genuine commitments to increased public investment in education.

The Transforming Education Summit of course still took place within a multilateral system in which binding agreements are rare. The SDGs could be adopted exactly because the ambitious targets were not tied to specific policies, implementation modalities or financing arrangements. Now the success of both the SDGs and climate agreements depend on accountability. We desperately need a global governance system that interrogates the structural barriers to progress, including the fundamental imbalance in power and resources between countries. There has to be a political mandate to examine the limited progress made over recent decades, despite the world now being richer than ever.

The newly established Global Education Mechanism is tasked with following up on the outcomes of TES. So far, there has been more interest in financing than in any other area. There are also high hopes for education commitments from both the Summit of the Future in 2024 and the Social Summit in 2025. The question is whether the multilateral global governance system is capable of addressing the changes required of governments and of the IFIs.

¹⁰ UN Transforming Education Summit (2022a).

¹¹ UNESCO (2021)

¹² Action Aid/Education International/Public Services International (2021)

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