

## **Education and Academia Stakeholder group**

### **Sectoral position paper HLPF 2020**

#### **"Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development"**

#### **Executive Summary**

This sectoral paper centers around the role of education in achieving the agenda 2030, as well as aims to analyse, through different perspectives, why we are still not on track to achieve SDG4 by 2030. All the points put forward in this paper stem from the point of view that education and lifelong learning are to be treated as fundamental human rights and a public good. This paper also seeks to put emphasis on how commodification of education remains a major challenge towards viewing education as a human right.

The analysis is done through three sections, which seek to address the achievements, the challenges for implementation of SDG4 and the improvements necessary within implementation. The different dimensions of sustainable development are taken into consideration when looking into the achievements we have had so far. It is important to emphasize that the human rights-based approach is the basis for the achievement of the SDGs. This approach develops the capacity of duty-bearers to meet their obligations on the one hand, and, on the other, encourages rights holders to claim their rights.

Recognising the progress made is an essential part in understanding what else needs to be done in order to find our way back on track with regards to the attainment of SDG4. In this regard, reference is made for instance to the tremendous progress towards the goal of universal primary education, and to the continuous movement towards gender parity in the last generation, as girls and young women in many parts of the world outnumber boys and young men in schools and universities.

The paper also seeks to highlight the contribution of civil society to the fulfilment of SDG4, which is many times underestimated. Civil society remains one of the main actors in providing education, through formal, non-formal and informal manners across the globe, and despite facing major challenges with the shrinking spaces within which it can operate, it continues to be at the forefront day in day out.

Needless to say, whilst appreciating the achievements is a good start, it is also important to thoroughly understand the challenges for implementing SDG4. Children, youth, and adults, especially in the global south, are facing significant barriers to effectively enjoy their right to education. This is due to both policy and financial challenges. Within existing and newly created policies across the globe, exclusion and discrimination remain significant barriers to achieve SDG4. This is also unfortunately accompanied by issues of gender inequality. Apart from this, conflict, climate change and migration are also significant challenges for governments and the international community making significant progress towards SDG4.

Furthermore, a problematic issue remains that while it is widely accepted that more resources for financing the Sustainable Development Agenda are needed, there is no consensus regarding the strategies that governments and international donors should adopt to protect the rights and interest of those who have been left behind.

One crucial section in this paper deals with what should be improved in order to achieve the Agenda 2030. The right to education is not limited to guaranteeing access to school services, but encompasses the content of education, teaching methods and school governance. The notion of transformative education should be positioned at the centre of policy debates on quality of education.

Lastly, in view of the growing threat of privatisation and commercialisation in, and of, education, and the regressive policies that are being witnessed in different countries and

regions, EASG puts forward its beliefs that public funding should always aim to strengthen public education systems, as stated in human rights law.

## **I. Introduction**

In Agenda 2030 and other related documents, education appears in its 'double' character: as the stand-alone Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) with 10 targets, whose conceptual background is the human rights approach; and also education as a necessary means for the implementation of several other goals, not only through three education targets under SDGs linked to health, work and climate change, but as the most sustainable way to reduce hunger, achieve equality and other goals and targets. Education and lifelong learning are considered to be powerful means of transformation, but only if they are treated as a fundamental human right and a public good. They can play an active role in promoting social, economic and environmental justice, boosting personal and community development, and supporting responsible and sustainable economic patterns.

When the world adopted Agenda 2030, there was huge hope for transformative change. Five years on in 2020, we find several very worrisome trends that threaten to change the direction of the initiative and this risks the entire implementation of Agenda 2030. UNESCO pointed out in its recent report that we are not on track and we will not achieve SDG4 unless serious rethinking and ambitious changes occur.

The worrisome tendencies are coming from different sectors of society, and naming just a few will indicate the scale of the problem.

The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) but also the crises that followed it produced a tectonic shift in economic, political and social models that shaped the world of education. The crisis in the welfare state had an especially negative effect on education. The denial of education as a human right and massive cuts in investments in the field of education in many countries

changed the understanding of education and its practices, and access to education became hard to get for many groups in numerous countries. The contemporary approach shifted the focus from education as a human right to the notion of human capital which understands education primarily in relation to its role in promoting economic growth. Not only did the marketization and privatization of education become mainstream, but education has also been reduced to the role of being a commodity for the industry or individual who can afford it, while the role of the state is reduced to facilitating this process. The disintegration of social structures and social services traditionally provided by the state, together with the disappearance of the network of social bonds drastically reduces the power of education and lifelong learning as a source of transformative power in communities and societies. The commodification of education is a direct denial of education as a human right and it directly shapes the situation where hundreds of millions of people are left behind.

This paradigm of education and learning is jeopardizing the implementation of the SDGs. When education is seen only through the lenses of economic growth, seeing people as human resources, and culture and nature only as assets for international business, only the economic aspect of development is boosted while social and environmental conditions are dramatically worsened. We are united in saying that “Business as usual” will not help to achieve the 2030 goals. For that purpose, education needs to be truly transformative, inspiring and supporting deep and structural changes, not only to help people to adapt to technological and other development, whose course is bringing the world to the edge at an accelerating speed. Rethinking existing patterns, finding innovative solutions of social, economic and environmental development requires education that is innovative and critical.

Another strong tendency has to do with the shrinking space and reduced resources for civil society which, around the globe, is one of the main providers of education, especially for marginalized groups. Across all regions,, with the rise of authoritarian regimes, the

weakening of democratic ones and a consequent restriction on the space for the voices of all people, including vulnerable and excluded groups, civil society is being squeezed out of the public sphere. They are struck by unduly restrictive laws and practices on the freedom of association and freedom of assembly and, ultimately, on democracy itself, although an independent and empowered civil society is a crucial component of a functioning democratic system. There are also fewer opportunities for broad-based dialogue on education and more limited involvement of civil society in government policy and planning processes. Thus, an important partner in the planning and monitoring of Agenda 2030 is being denied its right and role, and the education sector is losing an important pillar. There is hardly an area where the ambition “No one left behind” has such an important ally and partner in its implementation, as is the case with education and lifelong learning. Millions of marginalized people get their right to education through civil society, which is also the path to their right to decent work, dignity, equality and a sustainable environment.

In spite of all these challenges, civil society is still one of the bulwarks of the right to education, one of the enablers, carriers and advocates. Through numerous projects, activities, actions, initiatives, measures, networks, practical work and everyday efforts, civil society is still - for many - the only door into the world of education and thus the only route to other rights, goods and quality life.

This sectoral paper is organized in three sections:

- Achievements
- Challenges for the implementation of SDG4
- Improvements for implementation.

We are grateful to all members who contributed to the preparation of this text.

## II. Achievements from hard work

### 1. Dimensions of sustainable development

The 17 SDGs reflect the dimension and the ambition of the new universal Agenda, are of an integral and indivisible nature, and combine the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Therefore, the objectives can be grouped by taking into account their impact on environmental protection, social inclusion and economic development with decent work for all. This integrated and dialogical conception requires that all action or public policy be conceived and accountable for the way in which it regulates the three previously mentioned and closely related axes, without the improvement of one contributing to the detriment of the others.

The human rights-based approach is the basis for the achievement of the SDGs. This approach develops the capacity of duty-bearers to meet their obligations on the one hand, and, on the other, encourages rights holders to claim their rights. Governments have the obligation to respect, protect and fulfill every right:

*“To respect a right means refraining from interfering with the enjoyment of the right. To protect a right means to prevent other parties from interfering with the enjoyment of rights. To fulfil a right means to take active steps to put in place, laws, policies, institutions and procedures, including the allocation of resources, to enable people to enjoy their rights.”* (UNFPA, 2014).

From this perspective, social transformation fulfills the double task of being the final goal of the 2030 Agenda but also a world of possibility. Thus, social justice, equity and educational justice seem to be a powerful tripod when it comes to developing strategies that guarantee both that no one is left behind and the necessary conditions for the construction of peaceful societies, committed to sustainable development.

## 2. Some signs of progress

After five years of the great global compact of the 2030 Agenda, it is necessary to question the results achieved.

UNDP<sup>1</sup> data indicates that, since 2000, there has been tremendous progress towards the goal of universal primary education. The total enrolment rate reached 91% in developing regions and in 2015 the number of children not attending school decreased almost by a half worldwide.

This same report reflects on the progress of sub-Saharan Africa regarding the enrolment rate in primary school among all developing regions (from 52% in 1990 to 78% in 2012). The remaining challenges lie in the disparities within countries, especially between rural and urban areas.

If we look at this information from another viewpoint, the gaps between boys and girls, there has been a continuous movement towards gender parity in the last generation. Girls and young women in many parts of the world outnumber boys and young men in schools and universities. The Global Education Monitoring report (UNESCO, 2020) shows that enrolment rates for girls in primary and secondary education have nearly doubled in low-income countries, and that the gender gap in enrolment in primary education has been cut in half in the last 25 years. It is worth noting India's great progress in the Central and South Asian region, that went from having extremely laggard rates of girls in schools in 1990 to achieving gender parity in secondary education (UNESCO, 2020).

However, the heterogeneous progress among the countries, intersected by inequality, indicates that the rate of change is not fast enough and that the objectives set will not be achieved until 2050.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/es/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-4-quality-education.html>

We can trace the origins of target 4.7 of the education-related SDG to the UNESCO *Recommendation on Education for International Understanding, Cooperation and Peace and Education on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (the 1974 Recommendation). The global indicator of SDG 4 is based on 83 countries that participated in the Sixth Consultation on the implementation of the 1974 Recommendation and its principles are closely linked to target 4.7. Monitoring the implementation of the 1974 Recommendation is, therefore, an extraordinary opportunity to review the progress being made towards achieving SDG 4, paying special attention to: education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and the appreciation of cultural diversity and the contribution of cultivation to sustainable development. More than 80% of countries have indicated that they included the guiding principles of the Recommendation when evaluating students and almost all indicated that they are included in their curricula. However, only 17% of countries fully reflected these principles in lifelong teacher education programs.

Target 4.7 as it is, only measures global citizenship education (GCEd) as it is practised within the school curriculum. However, GCEd incorporates learning that is lifelong and occurs both inside and outside of schools. The indicators proposed do not address the situations where GCE is practiced by civil society organisations and families outside formal settings. This creates a major obstacle for countries that do not have a way of measuring non formal and informal learning outside of the school curriculum and for adults. This challenge proves a major setback for target 4.7. as it does not enable the creation of mechanisms for showing the work being done by civil society in GCE and thereby diminishes its effect on achieving SDG 4.

Although the debate is pending with the guarantees of the rights of migrant populations, the 2019 GEM report - whose focus is the monitoring of education, migrants and displaced



persons - is encouraging when it reflects that eight of the 10 main host countries of refugees include them in their national education systems.

## 2.1. The contribution of civil society to the fulfillment of SDG4

In terms of SDG 17: “A successful sustainable development agenda requires partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society. These inclusive partnerships built upon principles and values, a shared vision, and shared goals that place people and the planet at the centre, are needed at the global, regional, national and local level.”

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have for decades been a fundamental support for the most disadvantaged sectors of societies, giving a voice the voiceless, placing issues on the public agenda and making extraordinary efforts in the successive cycles of structural adjustment in which - many times - they assume responsibilities in place of shrinking states. The actions of CSOs have been extensive for decades, encompassing the fight against hunger and the lack of development opportunities, and promoting access to free, public education of quality. As long ago as 2001, UNESCO distinguished these “social functions” of CSOs from their “analytical function” or “governance”, through which they contribute to the processes of democratic consolidation in their respective societies. (Balbis, 2001).

In institutional terms, we value the different participation mechanisms that the 2030 Agenda has envisaged since its inception, as well as the Civil Society Participation Mechanism of the Forum on Sustainable Development of the Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) that facilitates access and dialogue at the regional level. In a context of limiting civic participation and high criminalization of rights defenders, even with their limitations, these spaces are valued by social organizations and become “umbrellas of citizen protection”.

It is virtually impossible to make an exhaustive record of the hundreds of thousands of initiatives that the different organizations carry out in their territories. However, by way of representation, we present exemplary activities that some of these CSOs undertake.

The impact that an action carried out concomitantly each year in 124 countries can reach is limitless. One such action is the **Global Action Week for Education (GAWE)**<sup>2</sup>, **organized by the Global Campaign for Education (GCE)**. The 100 national and regional educational coalitions and international organizations that work to guarantee the right to education all mobilize to draw the attention of the educational community, the media, society in general and especially political representatives on the need to make the right to quality education for all across the world real and effective.

**Envision 4.7** is a roadmap for the implementation of target 4.7 as a result of the agreement of 200 policy makers, researchers and members of civil society from different parts of the world, including ICAE, who participated in the Bridge 47 - Building Global Citizenship Conference.<sup>3</sup>

Some CSOs operate in regional networks which are very active in promoting SDG 4. **ASPBAE** in the Asia-Pacific Region<sup>4</sup>, the **Ibero-American League of Civil Society organizations**<sup>5</sup>, **Pampa2030** in Argentina, **CLADE**<sup>6</sup> in the Latin American and Caribbean region - hold seminars, courses, training workshops for trainers, campaigns on social networks to promote citizen participation regarding SDG 4. In Africa and Arabia, **ANCEFA** and **ACEA** respectively<sup>7</sup> take action to promote inclusive, free and quality education.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, visit <https://www.campaignforeducation.org/en/>

<sup>3</sup> For more information, visit: [https://bridge47.org/sites/default/files/20191/envision\\_4.7\\_programme.pdf](https://bridge47.org/sites/default/files/20191/envision_4.7_programme.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.aspbae.org/>

<sup>5</sup> The training is based on the MAIA methodology (MOVEMENT, AWARENESS, INSPIRATION, ACTION), the Ibero-American League is collaborating in this first edition: MAIA COURSE FOR THE SDGs 2019-2020. <http://www.ligaiberoamericana.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://redclade.org/>

<sup>7</sup> For more information, visit <https://ancefa.org/the-network/> and <https://www.arabcampaignforeducation.org/page-101-en.html>

### **III. Challenges for implementing SDG4**

Children, youth, and adults, especially in developing countries, are facing significant barriers to effectively enjoy their right to education. Although some barriers are context-specific, poverty, inequality, discrimination, as well as conflict and climate change-related emergencies are common patterns in the regions where most of those excluded from the right to education live. The pandemic caused by COVID19 is a terrible example of the devastating effect of a health emergency, affecting over 1.5 billion learners, deepening patterns of inequality and exclusion.

To illustrate the magnitude of those challenges, it is worth highlighting that the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) (2019) estimates that 1.3 billion people (23.1% of the world population) are multidimensionally poor and that nearly 50% of them are children under the age of 18. Many of them are not enrolled in school and are victims of child exploitation.

The overwhelming number of children facing multidimensional poverty does not only mean that their chances to enjoy their right to education are very limited but they are likely to have very little opportunity to escape poverty in the future. Education can open many doors with the route to escaping poverty being one of the significant opportunities it offers. However, the reality on the ground for a significant percentage of the global population is that their lack of opportunity to enjoy their right to education closes their routes to prosperity and increases their risks of being trapped in intergenerational poverty.

To make the promise of leaving no one behind a reality for those living with little income and few opportunities to escape poverty, governments and the international community should strengthen their political commitment and increase their investment in education

policies that respond to the specific needs of this socially and economically excluded group who live in poverty.

Against this backdrop, the remaining parts of this section characterise some of the critical challenges that governments should address to reach SDG4 by 2030. For brevity, the report focuses on the analysis of policy and financial challenges.

### Policy challenges

Exclusion and discrimination are significant barriers to achieve SDG4. Despite international human rights law stating that education is a basic human right, ethnic and political minorities, people with disabilities, girls and women, people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity are often at greater risk of exclusion from education systems. Inclusive education has become an important concept to highlight that education is a right for every person, but the reality is that those who have traditionally been excluded from education continue to be so.

Exclusion and discrimination are not only significant barriers to achieving the right to education today but also increase the risk of those excluded and their families being excluded in the future. Poverty traps are often related to exclusion and discrimination. A recent report by GCE (2019) suggests that education for children under five and the elderly members of the population have become a privilege rather than a basic right in many countries, regardless of that country's level of income.

In relation to gender inequality, recent reports reveal that girls and women have considerably less opportunity to fulfil their fundamental human rights in most regions of the world. Young women, for example, are more likely than young men to be neither enrolled in the education system nor in the labour market in nearly 70 per cent of the world's countries (United Nations, 2018). Although gender inequalities can be observed in nearly all corners of the world, they are more striking in regions such as Northern Africa and

Western Asia (UNESCO, 2016). Inequalities in education are then reproduced in other sectors. In the labour market, for example, inequalities are evident in the gender pay gap which remains an issue in most countries, including the wealthiest economies. Drawing on data from 45 countries, United Nations (2018) suggests that gender inequality in earnings against women is still pervasive: in 89 per cent of these countries the median hourly pay gap is 12.5%. By securing the right of girls and women to enjoy a high-quality education and introducing aggressive social policies to promote women's rights in every social, cultural, economic and political context, governments could make significant progress in overcoming the social injustice experienced by 50% of the population -girls and women – in their everyday lives.

Conflict, climate change and migration are also significant challenges for governments and the international community making significant progress towards SDG4. Although academics and policymakers often agree that the inclusion of migrants and refugees in the international development agenda is a significant step to acknowledge their rights and improve their living conditions (Piper, 2018; IOM, 2018, Likić-Brborić, 2018), recent UN reports suggest that migrants and refugees are at greater risk of being left behind by local and regional development policies (UNESCO, 2019). One of the most prominent issues to be highlighted is that the exclusion of migrants and refugees takes place even in contexts where financial resources to enrol them into the education system are available. In the context of the so-called 'migration crisis' in Europe, many GCE coalitions reported that the lack of policies to protect refugees' right to education in some countries was linked to the politicians' fear of being perceived as pro-refugee in contexts where migrants and refugees are portrayed by right-wing parties as a threat to the 'host' society.'

### Financial challenges

As the recent Global Sustainable Development Report (2019: XXIV) suggests, one of the critical challenges for putting the world on track to achieve the SDG Agenda is related to the allocation of financial resources - "Investment in the Sustainable Development Goals from

all sources is significantly short of what is needed". Besides, the same report suggests, inequalities in the distribution of wealth is significant in most regions of the world and mechanisms such as regulations and taxes are not always adequate to overcome those disparities.

While it is widely accepted that more resources for financing the Sustainable Development Agenda are needed, there is no consensus regarding the strategies that governments and international donors should adopt to protect the rights and interest of those who have been left behind.

Along with the lack of public investment in education, recent research reveals that privatisation of education is taking place in many countries. Drawing on case studies of Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania and Nigeria, Unterhalter, Robinson, Benito, and Coysh (2019) provide new evidence to confirm a significant expansion of private schools in low- and middle-income countries. Although legal and constitutional commitments to fulfil the right to education have been adopted in those four countries, their strategies for improving schooling rates in recent years primarily rely on the provision of education by private actors. Furthermore, the increasing participation of the private sector in the provision of education in the countries under analysis has been largely unregulated and has consistently resulted in stratified education systems which adversely affect those living on low incomes.

To add another example, Adrião, Crosso and Rodrigues (2019), have brought attention to the increasing role of the private sector in the provision of education in Brazil. Their analysis reveals that in the states of São Paulo, Pará and Pernambuco, over forty different private organisations, including corporate foundations, private companies and banks, are providing for-profit education.

Privatisation of education is a very significant challenge to achieving SDG 4 but it is not the only problem. Unfair tax systems and investment bias against those most excluded from

education systems are also significant barriers in many countries. The GEM Report (2016) estimates that unless countries adopt a radical shift in financing for education, the SDG 4 targets for primary and secondary education will probably be achieved by 2080, 50 years behind schedule. This means that governments should secure fresh financial resources to be invested in education. In doing so, they should invest their financial resources in strengthening public high-quality education, implementing progressive tax systems and targeting the investment in those social groups who are already left behind or at greater risk of being so.

#### **IV. What should be improved and how to implement SDGs**

##### **Integrity and Participation**

The Sustainable Development Agenda was conceived as a harmonious action plan to advance the strategic realization of human rights and the political commitments necessary to guarantee the integral development of individuals, communities and States and protect the environment. The agenda seeks to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and for this reason its goals and targets are interconnected and indivisible<sup>8</sup>.

However, we have observed that the follow-up and monitoring mechanisms of the Sustainable Development Agenda are not always effective in guaranteeing compliance, given that by nature they do not contemplate the justiciability of the State commitments, which are characteristic of the international legal systems, for instance. The United Nations Treaty Bodies do, however, promote the implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda in their fields of competence through the reporting process and thus Treaty Bodies also offer ready-made source of data to help track progress on the SDG implementation<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

<sup>9</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=30022&nr=201&menu=3170>

The complementarity between the work of the Treaty Bodies (which applies only around State-parties' obligations) and the SDGs, is far from being comprehensive and systematic. In the same way, the goals and targets of the Sustainable Development Agenda are often treated and analyzed in a disjointed manner and therefore accountability is also fragmented so the political commitment around its implementation is more evident in certain goals and targets than in others.

This *compartmentalization* of the agenda in practice degrades certain goals and targets while highlighting others, decreases self-criticism and also deepens the differences and divisions between the so-called "Global North countries" and "Global South countries" that have shaped the power relations and development interpretation in recent decades (UNESCO-Etxea, 2017).

In order to reinforce the integrality of the agenda, it is necessary to enhance the increasingly incisive and transparent participation of CSOs. The slogan "leave no one behind" also applies to the inclusion of CSO and their tracking and monitoring mechanisms on States and the UN, otherwise the SDG Agenda risks losing impact.

Each of the SDGs is a gateway to the others and their fulfillment depends on the comprehensive progress of the entire agenda. Education (SDG 4) is perhaps the best example of what an enabling right means, because by guaranteeing inclusive, quality education and lifelong learning, the achievement of the other 17 goals is boosted, and vice versa. As EASG has said before, one of the most important contributions of education is its potential to reduce gender inequalities and to eliminate gender disparities in education and work, especially by empowering girls and women and providing them equal chances through education.

The challenge of imagining, implementing and evaluating the mechanisms to advance the holistic realization of SDGs, forces a political and institutional review of the ECOSOC



architecture, starting with the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), in which the Major Groups and other Stakeholders should be more respectfully considered and better welcomed in the search for critical solutions to development problems.

### Curriculum and lifelong learning approach

The right to education is not limited to guaranteeing access to school services, but encompasses the content of education, teaching methods and school governance. The Convention on the Rights of the Child set the aims of education that States must pursue, making it clear that education is more than schooling and encompasses a wide range of life experiences and learning processes that allow individuals to develop their personality and aptitudes to lead a full life in society, through the enjoyment and respect of human rights.

To achieve these goals, education is called to transform power relations that maintain an unjust and violent status quo.

Transformative education is an alternative framework for understanding the purposes of education and in particular the ways education quality is conceptualised and assessed. The concept of transformative education primarily refers to the emancipatory notion of change.

Envisioned as a catalyst for change, education aims to challenge unfair social structures and promotes knowledge as the way to expand individual and collective freedoms, opportunities to enjoy their human rights and contribute to a democratic and fairer society, sustainable development, global citizenship and the respect and promotion of human rights within and beyond education systems.

The notion of transformative education should be positioned at the centre of policy debates on quality of education; public authorities as well as the international community should

provide the necessary attention for challenging discrimination and gender inequality and violence in curriculum development and school governance.

Beyond the specific obligations established by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, international human rights law extends those obligations to the entire population in need of education. Lifelong learning must be a reality that responds to the 750 million people worldwide who cannot read and write at the basic level of proficiency, two-thirds of them being women (UNESCO-GC, 2019). The challenge of providing educational opportunities to the young and adult population depends on the urgent establishment of free state plans and programs, adapted to the social and cultural characteristics of people who work, and also of those who live in irregular migratory situations, the elderly and disabled adults. These plans should be consistent with UNESCO's strategy, including learning that is (i) lifelong, for all age groups and throughout one's life; (ii) life-wide, through different learning settings throughout life and work; (iii) intersectoral, through embedding literacy in efforts for sustainable development in other sectors; and (iv) universal, an issue for least developed, developing and developed countries<sup>10</sup>.

More than a modality, lifelong learning implies a political positioning necessary for the universalization of education and requires specific financing, to prevent commercialization trends from occupying the spaces that should be filled by public institutions.

### CSO participation in decision making

CSOs, working with broad public accountability, have a particularly central role in fostering social accountability for the full delivery of SDGs, especially SDG4.

The importance of their participation in all the processes involved in the realization of the Sustainable Development Agenda is not only due to the instrumental role that is foreseen

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<sup>10</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-adopts-new-strategy-youth-and-adult-literacy-2020-2025-support-member-states>

in the literature (“all hands on deck”), but also to the mandate given by the resolution A / RES / 70/1 of the UN General Assembly, adopted on September 25, 2015. This resolution makes it clear that the SDGs and targets were adopted as a result of intensive public consultation and engagement with CSOs. But also, the resolution recognizes the role of these organizations in the implementation of the agenda, and encourages and promotes effective civil society partnerships.

However, we have seen that the central role that the agenda gives to CSOs is not only questioned within the UN, but also narrows day by day, as happens in many countries. Teachers and youth-led/students organizations and unions are victims of intimidation and attacks and are rarely taken into account in decision-making.

Advances in policy setting are also undermined by weak implementation and, in some countries, the trends towards the state’s declining role in delivering public services has decreased accountability to citizens (where the elite or corporations are playing an increasingly prominent role in driving policies). Taking all of this into account points to the continuing importance and role of civil society, as a crucial actor and stakeholder in both policy setting and implementation, at global, regional and country levels, in defending the rights of the most marginalised and poorest. In some places CSOs have voluntarily curtailed their role to mere implementers of government policy, sometimes because their revenue flows depend on doing so.

Without clear decisions and policies around the central role that CSOs play in SDG implementation, the goals and targets will continue to lag and in many cases will not be fully achieved. Such decisions must be the result of dialogue, never of the imposition, much less of the denial of one of the central actors needed for the implementation of the agenda.

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