

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

The Context: Asia, Sustainable Development and the UN Agenda for Education

The world today is beset by environmental degradation, socio-economic dysfunction and geopolitical instability – problems especially acute in many parts of Asia. In short, our current developmental trajectory is impelling us towards crisis. However, the dominant international discourse on education continues to see it primarily as a tool for enhancing economic growth, and takes for granted the intrinsically beneficial nature both of growth and of schooling. Our hopes for a future that is peaceful, prosperous and environmentally sustainable depend on grasping the broader meaning and potential of education. Asia, the continent that perhaps most starkly exemplifies the tensions between growth and sustainability, is an ideal place to begin this task.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are intended to set the global development agenda until 2030. Goal 4 exhorts member states to ensure ‘inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’. Under SDG 4, Target 4.7 calls for countries to integrate values-based and action-oriented learning into their education systems:

By 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.

United Nations, *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 2015

Amongst numerous international standard-setting declarations and programmes, systematic reviews of progress in integrating these concepts into

national education systems remain scarce. The global indicator for SDG 4.7 is the ‘extent to which (i) global citizenship education and (ii) education for sustainable development, including gender equality and human rights, are mainstreamed at all levels in (a) national education policies (b) curricula (c) teacher education and (d) student assessment’. But agencies and governments have so far lacked a baseline against which progress towards achieving SDG 4.7 can be monitored.

Supplying such a baseline in Asia was a key objective of compiling this report. But in attempting this task, it is important to highlight the challenges of implementing and monitoring a target which at first sight may seem an unwieldy conceptual hodgepodge. Ideas encompassed by SDG 4.7 include some yet to be assimilated into the lexicons of major languages, and potentially at odds with national curricular objectives. While ‘sustainable development’ and ‘global citizenship’ are often presented as add-ons designed to gear up schooling for the 21st century, they in fact challenge us fundamentally to rethink and redefine the purpose of education. These notions, if taken seriously, require us to make a radical departure from how education is conceptualised and organised today. Capturing this transformative aspiration of SDG 4.7 is a daunting yet pressing task.

Purpose and Structure: An Overview

In line with UNESCO’s efforts to reaffirm a humanistic vision of education, this report seeks to emphasise the transformative implications of SDG 4.7. This involves questioning the ethos of competition that informs dominant conceptions of education, in order to allow room for a vision that addresses the critical nature of current threats to peace and sustainability. UNESCO MGIEP selected Asia as a pilot region for reviewing progress towards the integration of SDG 4.7 into school curricula, since this is a vast, dynamic continent, culturally and ecologically diverse, and home to the majority of the world’s population. Asia is also undergoing rapid economic and political transformation, amidst persistent conflict – or the threat of conflict. Painting a rosy picture of the current state of education in Asia means ignoring its relationship to injustice, violence and environmental destruction. Coupling such obliviousness with self-congratulatory celebration of ‘achievement’ in the areas covered by SDG 4.7 is dangerously counterproductive, but is nonetheless common in international forums. We must not be afraid to highlight and confront the real challenges to meaningful implementation of SDG 4.7.

The present study contributes to recovering a vision of education based on a shared respect for human dignity and an ethos emphasising international collaboration over competition. This involves re-assessing the current international emphasis on monitoring and measuring student ‘outcomes’, and embracing a broader conception of education’s goals. The first part of the report presents the quantitative findings of a review of the extent to which concepts

embedded in SDG 4.7 are integrated in policy and curricula across Asia. At the same time, this part of the report highlights the limitations of the very attempt to quantify and ‘measure’ values and attitudes.

Making sense of the coding results required a broad interpretive framework sufficiently flexible to capture the specificities of the systems under review. Critically interpreting the quantitative data involved drawing on a wide range of existing research – ethnographic, sociological and historical – in education and related fields. The framework identifies three kinds of intertwined challenges to efforts to promote peace, sustainable development and global citizenship through education: (1) challenges of instrumentalism; (2) challenges of nationalism and identities; and (3) challenges of competitiveness and regimentation. The second part of the report contextualises the results of the coding exercise and discusses regional trends in light of these challenges.

Finally, the report concludes with considerations for the future. It suggests future actions by Member States and UNESCO to harness the potential of SDG 4.7 and set the direction of reform in systems of education globally.

PART I.

KEY REGIONAL FINDINGS: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF POLICY AND CURRICULUM

Coverage

This report builds on a project conducted by UNESCO MGIEP in partnership with the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education (UNESCO Bangkok) to review the current state of incorporation of SDG 4.7 concepts in national education policies and curricula in 22 countries in Asia, classified into four regions:

1. East Asia (China; Japan; Republic of Korea);
2. South Asia (Afghanistan; Bangladesh; Bhutan; India; Islamic Republic of Iran; Nepal; Pakistan; Sri Lanka);
3. Southeast Asia (Cambodia; Indonesia; Lao PDR; Malaysia; Philippines; Thailand; Viet Nam); and
4. Central Asia (Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; Mongolia; Uzbekistan).

Methods

Key education policy and curricular documents were collected from these 22 countries, and a total of 172 documents (including national curriculum frameworks and 4th and 8th grade subject curricula) were analysed using a common coding scheme adapted from previous UNESCO studies. While previous reviews have focused on so-called ‘carrier subjects’ of 4.7-related concepts such

as civic and citizenship education and history, the current study also looked at the official curriculum for ‘core subjects’ (mathematics, science, social studies and languages), given the proportion of instructional hours they occupy, their mandatory and examinable status, and their consequent role in forming the enduring dispositions of children and adolescents. The aim was to illuminate the prevalence or the relative weight of different concepts embedded in SDG 4.7 (e.g. human rights, gender equality, global citizenship) in core education policy and curricular documents.

Key Findings

Instrumental role of education in developing national identity and human resources

The countries reviewed generally emphasise the instrumental role of education in fostering national identity and developing human resources for economic development. Concepts associated with gender equality, peace, and global citizenship were found to be widely absent from national education policy and curricular documents analysed, with some exceptions. Across all 22 countries and among more than 80 sub-categories included in the coding scheme, ‘nation as privileged referent of identity’ was found to be the most prevalent concept. This emphasis, together with a generally low emphasis on ‘humanity as privileged referent of identity’, points towards the challenge involved in reorienting education in Asia towards global citizenship. In contrast to the general emphasis on ‘human resource development,’ concepts related to economic sustainability, such as ‘limits to growth’ and ‘green economy,’ were either absent or rarely featured.

Environmental aspects of sustainable development were widely cited, with an emphasis on conservation. However, ‘climate change’ and ‘renewable energy’ rated little coverage in the documents analysed. Most countries stressed the importance of ‘culture and heritage’, with particular reference to national traditions, customs and language, but acknowledgement of interconnections and interdependence across national boundaries was much rarer.

Skills and values embraced in education policy and curricula

‘Critical thinking’, ‘creative thinking’ and ‘problem-solving’ skills, as well as ‘collaboration’ and ‘empathy’ are evidently in vogue amongst policymakers and curriculum developers across Asia. But the overwhelming stress is generally on the instrumental dimension of these attributes. Such skills and competencies tend to be presented as important primarily for ensuring a flow of human resources for enhancing economic competitiveness. References to ‘civil liberties’ (under the category ‘human rights’) were completely absent in nine countries, and most featured no reference to the concepts included in the category ‘activism’ (‘participation in civic protest’, ‘engagement in debates on socio-

political issues’, and ‘action on issues of global reach’). By contrast, notions of ‘civic engagement’ (under the category ‘responsible lifestyle’) appeared to be endorsed in curricular documents across most countries. These patterns of emphasis are significant in indicating the nature of official visions of citizen-state relations across much of Asia, and raise questions regarding the extent of commitment to the transformative aspirations of SDG 4.7.

National curricular emphases and systemic realities

Some regional trends emerge, including the prominence given to ‘gender equality’ in South Asia (where countries ranking low in the Gender Development Index¹ are concentrated) and to ‘civil liberties’ in Central Asia (which encompasses countries rated as ‘authoritarian’ by the Democracy Index²). This might be interpreted as suggesting official recognition of particular problems in these areas, and genuine commitment to pursue improvement through education. However, alternative interpretations are possible. The absence of references to ‘civil liberties’ is observed in relatively democratic as well as ‘authoritarian’ countries; likewise, the paucity of references to ‘gender equality’ is common to countries rating high and low in the Gender Development Index. The meaning of coding results must therefore be examined on a case-by-case basis. This highlights the problematic nature of monitoring efforts based on tracking the ‘presence’ or ‘absence’ of particular concepts in official documents.

PART II. SUB-REGIONAL SYNTHESSES

While suggesting intriguing regional trends, the coding data alone tell us little about the state of education in individual countries. This is because policy and curricular documents frequently perform a symbolic function – conveying official aspirations or deflecting public criticism – rather than signaling a definite commitment to change. Analysis of the coding results thus required grounding in the historical, economic and geopolitical context as well as in theoretical understandings of education policy and curriculum. The second part of the report contextualises the review results and discusses regional trends in light of three challenges to the realisation of SDG 4.7 through education: (1) challenges of instrumentalism; (2) challenges of nationalism and identities; and (3) challenges of competitiveness and regimentation.

Challenges of Instrumentalism and Ethics

Policy and curricula across most countries surveyed (irrespective of their current level of development) emphasise the instrumental function of schooling in fostering human resources to enhance national economic strength.

1 See <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-development-index-gdi>.

2 See <https://www.eiu.com/democracy2016>.

Interpretations of the meaning and purpose of education thus tend to be rather narrow; its role in enhancing national competitiveness, and in securing individual commitment to that goal (and capacity to contribute to it), overshadows broader, more humanistic conceptions. Across East and Southeast Asia, this instrumentalism is strongly evident in both countries that have recently opened up economically and those that have already achieved ‘developed’ status. Notions such as learner-centred pedagogy, ‘creativity’ and student autonomy are heavily emphasised in many curricula, but mainly for their perceived role in developing economically useful skills and competencies. Far less common is acknowledgement of the importance of such capabilities to the enhancement of human fulfilment and promotion of active, participatory citizenship. Meanwhile, the qualities of autonomy and independence ostensibly valued in students are widely denied to teachers themselves. Especially in South, Central and parts of Southeast Asia, teachers suffer from low status and a lack of training that critically impair their ability to adopt sophisticated pedagogical approaches. And across the continent, often rigid and unaccountable systems of state control over curriculum development, textbooks and schools militate against the full realisation of the ideals encompassed by SDG 4.7.

Challenges of Nationalism and Weak Regionalism

In most countries surveyed, an intense and often chauvinistic curricular emphasis on moulding national identity poses an acute challenge to a vision of citizenship education based on ‘universal values’ (e.g. human rights and cultural diversity). SDG 4.7 envisages preparing learners to live together on a planet under pressure, promoting tolerance and understanding both within and between nation-states. However, curricula in many Asian countries uncritically endorse strongly ethno-nationalist identities, often effectively reducing minorities or migrants to second-class status. Narratives of foreign hostility or inferiority are widely used to bolster national loyalties. Despite scattered references to the desirability of a ‘global’ outlook, fostering a strong national ‘selfhood’ takes precedence – as curricula prepare students for an international arena seen as characterised by inveterate competition. The explicit and positive embrace of regional identities in curricula is strikingly absent – even in Southeast Asia, the only region possessing (in ASEAN) a functioning framework for transnational collaboration. In East Asia, a pathology of competitive victimhood characterises narratives of recent conflict, with nations vying to portray themselves as the epitome of violated innocence. In South Asia, meanwhile, attempts to promote curricula that embrace the region’s social and cultural diversity have struggled to make headway in a context of increasingly intolerant nationalism and communalism.

The teaching of languages, potentially a crucial tool for fostering greater inter-communal and international understanding, has tended to be neglected or viewed in narrowly instrumentalist terms. In multilingual societies, the majority linguistic community is seldom encouraged and never compelled to learn

languages of linguistic minorities. Foreign language education often begins and ends with English, foregoing opportunities to use language learning to strengthen transnational Asian identities.

Challenges of Competitiveness and Regimentation

There is increasing international recognition that schooling is not a positive experience for many children and adolescents, especially in the Asia-Pacific region – a problem that UNESCO Bangkok’s ‘Happy Schools’ initiative aims to tackle. In addition to describing the magnitude of competitive pressures experienced by students in many Asian societies (manifested not least in the spread of examination-preparatory ‘shadow education’), this report stresses the implications of what are often differentiated schooling experiences for the ‘elite’ and the ‘masses’. Elitist approaches to education – long-established in some societies, re-emergent in others – lead to the blatantly unequal distribution of knowledge and sensibilities, undermining a sense of shared humanity and global citizenship. Credentialism – excessive reliance on academic credentials as the measure of a person’s ability – is endemic and spreading across much of Asia. Ironically, it is often associated with meritocratic policies and ideologies ostensibly aimed at promoting equality, but which in fact serve to reproduce and legitimise inequality.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

This analysis corroborates the well-established tendency of mass schooling to fall subservient to the imperatives of the nation-state and promote narrowly nationalistic conceptions of citizenship. A highly economic and state-centred idea of development dominates understandings of the role of education across most of Asia today. The idea of the active and reflective citizen who engages critically with the state in a participatory democracy is largely absent from official educational discourse, even in societies where electoral democracy is relatively well established.

Despite a global consensus regarding the desirability of education for peace, sustainable development and global citizenship as adumbrated in SDG 4.7, integration of these conceptions in national curricula remains an under-researched and under-theorised area. The aim of this review was not to gather and showcase ‘good practices’ self-reported by governments or agencies. Rather, it set out to assess progress – or the lack of it – towards realising these ideals, identify factors promoting or hindering progress, and suggest issues that warrant particular attention from those concerned to enhance education’s contribution towards securing a peaceful, sustainable and secure future for all. It concludes that educational change needs to be considered in tandem with reforms to political and social structures, and reappraisal of the cultural or ideological assumptions that underpin them.

Suggestions for Future Action by Member States and UNESCO

- 1. Rethink the fundamental priorities of education policy.** The potential of education for promoting collective prosperity and individual opportunity is beyond doubt. But schooling is important not just for its capacity to confer job-ready ‘skills’ or build ‘human capital’. It can both divide and unite, oppress and liberate, warp minds and enlighten them, and by promoting unsustainable socio-economic models ultimately impoverish rather than enrich us. Policymakers urgently need make promoting peace, sustainability and a consciousness of shared humanity central to their visions for educational development. SDG 4.7 should be seen not just as one of a menu of educational ‘goals’, but as the goal around which all others revolve.
- 2. Create a platform to bring together experts in child-centred education and curriculum designing in core subjects at primary and secondary levels.** Calls to integrate ESD, GCED and related concepts across all types and levels of education (formal and non-formal, kindergarten to postgraduate) mean that a focus on the particular challenge of designing curricula for basic schooling has largely been lost. Re-designing core subject curricula to promote sustainable development and global citizenship demands considerable multi-disciplinary expertise and awareness. Academic expertise in the psychology and sociology of education (to investigate how youngsters think and learn in different circumstances), and in the pedagogic sciences, is also required.
- 3. Promote a participatory model of curriculum development.** Treat teachers as partners in curricular design and planning debates rather than simply as delivery technicians. Lack of professional excitement, interest and autonomy is causing many ambitious teachers to leave the profession. Involve teachers in shaping curricular policies that affects classroom life. Restore the confidence of teachers as autonomous professionals capable of modelling the kind of active and engaged citizenship we seek to promote amongst students – rather than treating them as passive minions of controlling authorities.
- 4. Reassess international emphasis on monitoring and measuring educational ‘outcomes’.** Policymakers need to work from broader conceptions of the purposes of education, and focus much more on improving *inputs* – such as curriculum development, teacher training and the improvement of teaching materials – rather than simply on monitoring *outputs*. Competitive mechanisms and testing procedures aimed at securing ‘accountability’ tend to lead to curricular narrowing and reduced teacher autonomy and confidence. In line with 2 and 3 above, involvement in designing these ‘inputs’ also needs to be less centralised and more participatory.