



Global education challenges: Exploring religious dimensions

Katherine Marshall^{a,b,c,*}

^a Practice of Development, Conflict, and Religion, Georgetown University, United States

^b Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University, United States

^c World Faiths Development Dialogue, Georgetown University, United States



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ABSTRACT

Education goals are central to global agendas for sustainable development and humanitarian action, but these agendas tend to deal glancingly, if at all, with religious dimensions. Religious institutions play significant parts in national and international education systems and approaches in many countries, sometimes as critical partners or significant critics. Understanding religious differences is increasingly understood as central to citizenship and peaceful societies. This article explores six topics where religious actors are particularly involved: delivery of education and outreach to underserved populations; specific education approaches for refugees and displaced populations; curricular focus on pluralism and ‘religious literacy’; addressing education challenges surrounding values in education and understandings of citizenship; training of religious leaders; and advocacy for education goals and reforms.

1. Education as a right and an imperative: religious engagement?

A high-level international commission report issued in October 2016 (‘The Learning Generation’) highlighted global challenges ahead for education: ‘Unless we change course now, nearly 1 billion school-aged children will still be denied basic secondary-level skills in 2030. Even in 2050, one child in three in Africa will not be able to complete basic secondary education... If we transform the performance of education systems, unleash innovation, prioritize inclusion, expand financing, and motivate all countries to accelerate their progress to match the world’s top 25% fastest education improvers, we can build the Learning Generation’ (International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, 2016). The Commission’s recommendations build on the global consensus reflected in the year 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their successors, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) approved by United Nations (UN) member states in 2015. SDG 4 sets out the contemporary framework and bold objective: ‘Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote

lifelong learning’. ‘The Learning Generation’ report’s emphasis on quality and equity likewise reflects contemporary concerns about the relevance of education and deep inequities between and within nations.

Education is widely acknowledged as a basic human right and a critical prerequisite for successful contemporary democracy and for thriving, sustainable, and just economies and societies. The specific SDG education goals have grown out of a decades long, strengthening international consensus calling for joined global efforts to assure ‘Education for All’ (EFA).¹ Broad commitments were launched formally at the global conference in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and both goals and monitoring systems have sharpened since then – for example, from an earlier focus on primary education and increasing enrollments of girls to the current focus on full educational systems, lifelong learning, and broad understandings of inclusion. Current objectives include not only access for all to primary and secondary education but also quality education, addressing glaring inequities, and early childhood education (Pritchett, 2013). Progress toward goals is measured regularly in various ways and debates about the quality and direction of education

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* Corresponding author at: Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University, United States.

E-mail address: km398@georgetown.edu.

¹ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/>.

figure prominently at national and international levels. The goals are justified in ethical (fairness and equity) and material (preparation for employment and citizenship) terms. Education as a right and as a central link in the development chain thus ranks high on most global agendas.ⁱⁱ

The marginal treatment of religious facetsⁱⁱⁱ in the global discussions is striking and puzzling ('The Learning Generation' report cited above is a case in point as is the 2018 World Development Report^{iv}). Religious institutions play major educational roles, and religious beliefs as to educational curricula and pedagogy are pertinent for core education goals and design. One reason why religious aspects have tended to be ignored is that in framing global education goals, the state is seen as carrying the primary responsibility. The assumption is that the state itself will support, deliver, and regulate education. While there is increasing recognition that many sectors of society are involved, notably private and civil society actors, religious actors are relatively neglected.

Reasons for this neglect include historical events that actively separated religious and secular approaches in education, concerns to assure impartial treatment of different communities in public educational systems, and special sensitivities around religious involvement in national affairs in various countries.^v This includes quite widespread fears that religiously run or shaped education cannot be separated from efforts to convert to a faith (fear of proselytism). The sheer size and complexity of religious communities, beliefs, and educational roles present daunting challenges that range from poor and confusing data to the perils of sweeping generalizations about roles of religion and culture. Lack of engagement with religious actors can also reflect differences in approach, agendas, and priorities among disciplines and communities; these differences can be perceived or actual. For example, the 'Learning Generation' report focuses squarely on four transformations seen as vital to achieving long-term goals: performance, innovation, inclusion, and financing. The SDGs highlight quantitative targets and likewise focus on system performance and equity. Two topics that religious actors highlight often –cultural relevance and values as a goal of education–may be embedded in these agendas, but how is not always obvious. The way goals for inclusion and innovation are discussed by secular and religious actors tend to sound very different even where at their core they address similar issues.

The focus here is on six dimensions of global educational challenges with special relevance for religious actors and institutions. (a) Religious institutions run large education systems that provide a significant share of education in many countries. Parts of these systems are models of excellence, educating leaders and serving as exemplars of what can be achieved; others fall near the bottom of the heap in terms of quality and social benefit. Especially relevant for global development goals are their capacities for innovation, access, and knowledge, especially for poverty-related access and achievement issues. Poor data and understanding of scope and performance often limit constructive engagement of these systems in national policies. (b) Widely varied actors linked to religious traditions play important roles in efforts to address contemporary challenges of assisting refugee and internally displaced

populations with wide-ranging education programs. (c) Religious institutions often do and certainly should contribute to defining what is taught in national education systems about religion–across curricula. Increasing general understanding about religions is a fundamental part of identity and culture for the many world citizens who live in increasingly plural societies. Understanding religious approaches can be critical for social cohesion. (d) Religious institutions commonly highlight their roles in and concern for core social values. They play significant roles in preparing young people to be informed and proactive global citizens. These global citizenship challenges link at a fundamental level to ancient and broad questions about how educational approaches and systems address questions of values and how that translates into educational practice. (e) Training of religious leaders is a generally neglected topic for education policy, yet in today's era of globalization, future religious leaders and scholars need heightened awareness about living within dynamic and plural societies and understanding issues of social change cum development (gender equality, for example). And (f), religious institutions and leaders can be powerful advocates for social justice, including education for all, at global, regional, national, and community levels. Likewise, their opposition or tepid support can slow progress.

From this starting point, the article highlights briefly the extensive experience with schooling at all levels of many religious traditions, and long-standing, sophisticated, and authentic religious commitments to learning and education. This experience and the moral underpinnings of religious support for education are important assets. There are many pertinent models, some well known (Jesuit education), some less so (the Aga Khan Network, for example). Various faith-inspired approaches address the central challenges for global education: service delivery for some of the world's poorest populations as well as shaping elite values. Religious institutions also influence opinions and politics on thorny issues for education policy –for example, standards for religious literacy, treatment of minorities in contemporary plural societies, gender norms, extremist teaching, and shifting expectations and norms on secular versus religious approaches in law and practice. The core argument is that, notwithstanding widely diverse situations and particular sensitivities, religious institutions should be engaged as significant players for achieving global education goals.

2. Education delivery: access and integration of systems

Religious institutions and communities run schools, widely varied but covering virtually all types of education institutions from pre-kindergarten through post-graduate and adult education. There are no reliable estimates on the aggregate share of religiously run education (though some broad figures, up to 50%, are fairly commonly heard). World Bank economist Quentin Wodon's review of data from 16 sub-Saharan African countries found that 14% of primary school enrollment and 11% of secondary school enrollment was in faith-inspired schools (Wodon, 2013, 2014; Wodon and Lomas, 2015; University of Birmingham, 2015). This is indicative but a very partial view. The mixed guesstimates highlight serious shortfalls of data on quantity and quality. What is clear is that in some countries religiously run education is a significant part of the education system while in others (especially where religious schools have been nationalized or outlawed) its part is relatively small.

Relationships between religiously run education and the state and more specifically public education systems vary widely. Religious schools are well mapped and integrated within national systems in some instances, but elsewhere they may be highly decentralized and operate quite separately, without official sanction, certification, or oversight. Catholic Church-run school systems are among the largest and most significant. As an illustration, Catholic Church figures put the number of students in Catholic schools in Africa in 2012 at close to 23.5 million (Grace and O'Keefe, 2007). Arrangements vary by country, but governments commonly recognize Catholic schools as private schools.

ⁱⁱ See Heyneman (2008b) for a thoughtful critique of the background of Education for All, including its flaws.

ⁱⁱⁱ Definitions are contentious where religion is concerned. The terms 'religious', 'faith', and 'spiritual' are used often with specific significance but quite differently in different contexts. 'Religious' often suggests association with a specific religious institution while 'faith' and 'spiritual' may carry a broader and less institutional significance. But there is no consensus on the matter. This article uses 'religious' and 'faith' interchangeably, with an effort to reflect the preference of the relevant institution or community. The term 'religious actors' is preferred to 'religious leaders', reflecting a larger group of individuals and institutions, beyond those with formal institutional leadership roles. See Marshall and Van Saanen (2004), Marshall and Keough (2007), Marshall (2010, 2013).

^{iv} The World Bank, *The World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise*. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2018>.

^v Two recent books make the point about the dearth of general knowledge about religion and its negative consequences particularly well: Albright (2007) and Prothero (2008).

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