



Enabling environments for equity, access and quality education post-2015: Lessons from South Africa and Tanzania



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ABSTRACT

In this paper we seek to contribute to the post-2015 education agenda by shifting the focus from considerations of what education goals and targets should be to a people-centred exploration of enabling environments, within and beyond education, for equity, access and quality. Theoretically, the paper draws on the capabilities approach. Empirically, we present data from two independent qualitative studies conducted in South Africa (n = 40) and Tanzania (n = 10) with university students who accessed higher education despite trends of low participation for their social class and/or gender. The paper highlights the importance of taking account of both instrumental and intrinsic values of education. Enablers in the domains of school, family and community are identified and their contribution to educational well-being and achievement are demonstrated.

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1. Introduction

Widespread debate about education within the post-2015 development arena has taken place in the run up to 2015 and continues today – most recently in the form of the Incheon Declaration which was the outcome of the 2015 UNESCO World Education Forum (UNESCOPRESS, 2015). From the outset, the global consultation processes, led by UNESCO and UNICEF, have emphasised that regardless of the form the educational goals and/or targets take, the emphasis must be on *equity, access and quality* learning (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2013a, p. 792). This emphasis is reflected across all seven targets included within the ambit of Goal 4 of the proposed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030. Goal 4 seeks to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (United Nations, 2015, p. 7).

However, arguments about the role education should play in the post-2015 development agenda have also been uncertain and contradictory. For instance, as noted by McGrath (2014), MyWorld survey showed that while education was the number one priority amongst the more than one million respondents, in contrast, within the development “expert” community, education is not a major focus. Instead, education hardly features in mainstream

development accounts and, when it does, the understanding of education is highly instrumental and problematic – often seen as “a relatively simple technology that can be delivered in a way that is little different from distributing mosquito nets” (McGrath, 2013); see also, Mercer, 2014). Further, there is also concern that despite the potential of global target setting for change, there is ample evidence of unintended consequences of targets such as those specified within Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (for example, Fukuda-Parr et al., 2013; Unterhalter, 2013; Unterhalter and North, 2011). Presumably it will be difficult to avoid these pitfalls in the case of the SDGs. Notable have been concerns about what equality in education really means when the focus is on input and output measures, with little emphasis on educational processes and without sufficient consideration of educational quality (Unterhalter, 2013). Also important, but receiving relatively little attention within the global debates, is a consideration of the complex social and gender dynamics that play out within families, communities and educational institutions, all of which have both positive and negative implications for equity, access and quality in education (Unterhalter, 2009). Concerns have also been raised that inputs from the global South to the broader debates about the post-2015 agenda remain relatively few and far between (Alhawsawi and Hanna, 2013; Sayed and Sprague, 2013; Tungaraza et al., 2013).

In this paper we contribute to these debates by shifting the focus from the considerations of what suitable education goals and targets might be to a people-centred exploration of enabling environments within and beyond education. In doing so, we are

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particularly drawing on the rich perspectives from qualitative and interpretative development research that places emphasis on people's life-worlds and 'voices'. We acknowledge the call for more creative communicative and collaborative exercises across methods and disciplines (see also, Fennel and Arnot, 2009; McGrath, 2014), and thus our aim is to advance such epistemological and methodological engagement in educational debate that validates the voice and subjectivity of those who are 'the targets' of the SDGs (see, Unterhalter, 2007). In this manner, educational solutions take "into consideration not only the global benchmarks, but also, and most importantly, the situation on the ground" (Lehtomäki et al., 2014; p. 42).

Theoretically our argument is rooted in the capabilities approach. Drawing on two independent studies conducted in South Africa and Tanzania, with participants who have beaten the odds of low national participation rates¹ and reached higher education, our focus of analysis is on the complexities and dynamics of social systems embedded in any human endeavours, including education. From such a point of view, educational advancement and success seem to 'have little to do with global policy goals but far more to do with smaller level interventions and dialogic practices in classrooms and communities' (McGrath, 2013). This paper addresses explicitly in-school and out-of-school environments and highlights the critical issues which enabled the research participants to reach higher levels of education than most others of their social class and/or gender. Hence, there are lessons to be learned, we argue, from their experiences and insights, to be utilised in support of meaningful achievement of equity, access, and quality in education in ways that take account of local specificities. Our analysis highlights the complex intersections, and sometimes contradictions, of equity, access and quality in local contexts.

The paper begins with a brief consideration of some of the central issues within the post-2015 agenda, with a focus on those conversations that our studies can inform. We then provide a brief overview of the capabilities approach, drawing particular attention to what capabilities informed research contributes to broader post-2015 education issues. After introducing the studies conducted in South Africa and Tanzania, the remainder of the paper presents our empirical results identifying enablers of educational access and advancement, so providing evidence that can contribute to post-2015 conversations (cf. Faul, 2014; Skelton, 2014).

2. Post-2015 education agenda

To situate our findings and to locate the arguments we make in this paper, in this section we briefly discuss some of the key aspects of post-2015 education debates and the emerging education agenda. Since in the post-2015 educational domain lessons from both EFA and MDGs are important we reflect on both here. To start with we must acknowledge that to construct meaningful goals and targets is undoubtedly a difficult task, the complexity in definition reflecting the complexity of reality and heterogeneity of contexts. However, much of the post-EFA criticism is directed towards the lack of conceptual clarity (for example, Palmer, 2014 from a skills/vocational education perspective; Subrahmanian, 2005 who highlights the lack of clear conceptualisation of gender).

In addition, there is the much broader debate around the understanding and conceptualisation of *quality* with serious methodological implications (see for example, Buckler, 2015; Tikly and Barrett, 2011). In consequence, one of the critical lessons for

the future to be taken from reflections on the existing goals is that they need to be clearly expressed and defined (Rose, 2015). In an effort to reclaim EFA's broader agenda, many in the education community began calling for a shift from a focus on access to a focus on *access plus learning* (Winthrop et al., 2015). This focus on learning, or educational quality, has carried over into the post-2015 debates and is reflected in the formulation of the SDG targets for Goal 4. Thus, in current debates we begin to see a somewhat more expansive view of education that takes account of access and learning, and moves beyond narrow considerations of promoting basic literacy and numeracy. As a result, what is different now, compared to when the EFA and MDG goals were being formulated, are the strong calls for access to be conceived of beyond primary education, to include secondary and tertiary education and the embracing of a more expansive view of educational quality (Roberts and Ajai-Ajagbe, 2013; UNESCO and UNICEF, 2013b).

Reporting on the post-2015 recommendations made by Commonwealth Ministers of Education to the High Level Task team, Bunwaree (2013, p. 831) presents three principal goals for education. The third goal is of particular relevance to this paper. Principal goal three is to "[R]educ[e] and seek to eliminate differences in educational outcomes among learners associated with household wealth, gender, special needs, location, age and social group". In explaining the goal further, the Commonwealth Ministers of Education note that "[P]rogressive reduction of the gaps in achievement caused by disadvantage, in conjunction with the improvement of overall achievement, is key to the attainment of all development goals" (Bunwaree, 2013, p. 831). While few would disagree with these formulations, what is missing is a sense of *how* this might be achieved. Further, while it is fairly common for the literature on the post-2015 education agenda to draw attention to obstacles to access, equity and quality, there tends to be rather less emphasis on reporting about *enablers*. For example, in the UNESCO/UNICEF report on the education thematic consultations, the following main obstacles to educational quality are noted: social context, narrow focus on primary education, inequity, inputs and infrastructure, governance and narrow conceptions of educational processes (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2013b, p. 23). Little is said of enablers, although a few examples of relevant projects are noted.

The United Nations Report of High-Level Eminent Persons proposed four targets making up goal 3, to 'provide quality education and lifelong learning'. The approach to target setting was one of formulating global goals, but allowing space for national specificities. Although the currently proposed SDG for education differs somewhat from this formulation, there are important nuances in the goals set in that report. The educational targets for goal 3 were specified as follows (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2013b, p. 36, emphasis added; see also, Revaz and Gragert, 2013):

- a) Increase by x% the proportion of children able to access and complete pre-primary education
- b) Ensure every child, *regardless of circumstance*, completes primary education able to read, write and count well enough to meet minimum learning standards
- c) Ensure every child, *regardless of circumstance*, has access to lower secondary education and increase the proportion of adolescents who achieve recognised and measurable learning outcomes to x%
- d) Increase the number of young and adult women and men with the skills, including technical and vocational, needed for work by x%

Of particular importance in this formulation of possible targets, we argue here, is the inclusion of the phrase 'regardless of circumstance'. Our research in two African country contexts,

¹ In 2012, GER in tertiary education in South Africa was 19.7% and the proportion of females 22.7% in comparison to 16.6% of male students. In Tanzania, the numbers were 3.9%, 2.8% and 5.1%, respectively. (UIS 2014)

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