

## **Three lessons for educational quality in post-2015 goals and targets: Clarity, measurability and equity**

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### Abstract

Amongst those engaged in devising post-2015 education targets, there is general agreement on the centrality of quality. However, there is greater debate on whether the quality of education can and should be measured by learning outcomes. Even if learning outcomes are viewed as an appropriate measure, what type of outcomes should be measured? Offering lessons from the goals that were set in 2000, this article highlights the importance of making sure goals and targets are clear and measurable, and put equity at their heart. From a rights-based perspective, the paper proposes tracking progress towards a universal target that, at a minimum, ensures that all children, regardless of circumstance, complete primary school and achieve the basics in reading and mathematics. The paper illustrates the importance of adopting a 'stepping-stones' approach to ensure that no one is left behind by 2030, with interim targets that assess progress for the most disadvantaged.

### Introduction

As we approach the 2015 deadline for the Education for All (EFA) goals that were adopted in 2000 at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, it is now apparent that none of the six goals that were agreed will be met (UNESCO, 2014a). This is neither an argument for complacency, nor is it a reason to turn our backs on targets that aim to hold policymakers to account. As the past decade has shown, while it is disappointing that the goals have not been met, much has been achieved. More children are in school than ever before, and the slowing of progress in recent years has turned the spotlight on the need to pay greater attention to reaching the marginalized. Rather, with debates gaining pace for developing goals after 2015, it is vital to learn lessons from past experience to ensure greater justice for those who deserve to benefit the most from goals - namely children and young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, whether due to poverty, gender, disability, or where they live.

In debating what goals and targets should be set for the future, it is important to remember what is at stake. Failing a generation of children and young people by offering an education of such poor quality, particularly to those who are already the most vulnerable, is both a travesty of justice for them, as well as for the societies in which they live. The aim of future global goals should, therefore, correct one of the major failures of the existing goals by putting equity at their heart. By doing so, these goals can be used to hold governments to account for

reaching those who often do not have a voice, and so contribute to achieving a shared vision of a world free of poverty, and one where everyone is able to fulfill their basic rights, including to education.

To those who express fatigue with global frameworks, Watkins (2014: 2) offers a powerful response: 'at a time when international cooperation is at a low ebb, when poverty is slipping down the global agenda, and levels of inequality across and within countries are drifting beyond the bounds of acceptability, failure to develop an ambitious post-2015 framework to replace the MDGs would create a dangerous vacuum.'

This paper draws on my experience as director of the EFA Global Monitoring Report (2012; 2014a). Learning lessons from tracking progress towards global education goals, the paper aims to identify how we can do better in the future. Recognising the need to pay more attention to ensuring all children have access to a good quality education, the paper provides an example of a post-2015 target that tracks progress towards all children learning basic skills in literacy and numeracy by the end of the primary cycle. It shows the importance for progress to be assessed for the most disadvantaged groups, and to see such a target as a means to identifying nationally and locally appropriate strategies, if we are to fulfill commitments that no one is left behind.

### Lessons from 15 years of Education for All

Successful goals and targets are easily communicated, such that they capture public concerns and provide a focal point for global mobilization and action (Sachs, 2012; Watkins, 2014). They should not be seen as an end in themselves but rather a trigger for action, spurring governments to identify and implement contextually-relevant strategies that can achieve universal rights. An important advantage of internationally-agreed goals and targets is that they transcend national politics, and so avoid shifting in priorities according to which party is in power.

Looking across the current six EFA goals, these bear a striking resemblance to those commonly proposed after 2015. Notably, both the existing and future goals and targets emphasise the quality of education, and ensuring equity across all of the goals and targets (Rose, 2014).<sup>1</sup> What, then, are the lessons from the existing goals for the future? Specific lessons are likely to vary for each of the goals. There are, however, common features that can help to explain their greater success, or otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> A notable difference between the EFA goals and proposed post-2015 targets is that the latter include a target on teachers and one on finance (see Rose, 2014, for a discussion of the comparisons). It should also be noted that there is some confusion and ambiguity in the way that the terms 'goals' and 'targets' are used in the EFA and post-2015 frameworks. For the purposes of this paper, I adopt the terminology each of them use: EFA has six 'goals', while the post-2015 framework has one overarching 'goal' and seven 'targets'. In reality, each of these goals and targets have several sub-targets.

The first lesson is that more clearly expressed goals and targets get more attention. Clarity requires that language used is unambiguous and can be understood by non-specialists. So goal 3 of the EFA framework that aimed to ensure learning needs are met through 'appropriate learning and life skills programmes' has failed to gain traction over the past 15 years due to lack of common agreement on how 'life skills' should be defined. As each edition of the EFA Global Monitoring Report illustrates, too much time and energy has been spent debating the meaning of the goal, which has been a distraction to identifying concrete policy actions that can make a difference to the skills needed for young people to earn a decent living and lead a fulfilling life.<sup>2</sup>

A second lesson is the need to make sure that each target is measurable. Two of the EFA goals that were most straightforward to measure, and for which data were more readily available – goal 2 on universal primary education and the aspect of goal 5 on gender parity - were those that received most attention, and also showed most progress. To be measurable, targets also need to be timebound. Yet only these two goals, along with goal 4 on adult literacy, specified a date by which they were expected to be reached.

One of the problems with measurement of the EFA goals was that indicators and data sources were not identified at the time of developing the goals. So, while the adult literacy goal was specified in a way that could be measured, poor quality data (primarily based on self-reported literacy from census data that are collected intermittently) has made tracking progress difficult.

Even the potentially more straight-forward goal of universal primary education has suffered from measurement problems as indicators were not agreed at the time of specifying the goals. As a result, different measures were used to assess progress towards universal primary school completion by the World Bank (using the gross intake rate to the last grade of primary school) and by the EFA Global Monitoring Report (primarily using the net enrolment rate). Both approaches have their flaws, over-estimating the extent to which primary school completion has been achieved – and also potentially show quite different results (UNESCO, 2010).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The 2012 EFA Global Monitoring Report was dedicated to the theme of skills and, for the first time, provided a framework for defining skills for the purposes of goal 3. However, as the Report pointed out, there are still serious deficiencies in data available to track progress towards this goal which are likely to remain after 2015 (UNESCO, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> The gross intake rate to the last grade of primary school expresses the share of children entering the last grade as a proportion of the official age group for that grade. It tends to be inflated (with many countries displaying a rate over 100%) as it includes children who started school late or repeated grades. The net enrolment rate measures the proportion of primary school aged children who are in school. Countries with a net enrolment rate close to 100% have most of their primary school age children in the school system, but the indicator does not identify where they are within the system. Some countries might, therefore, have a high net enrolment rate with a large proportion of the school-aged children enrolled in early grades due to starting school late or high levels of repetition. As a result, they may still be a distance from achieving universal primary completion.

A benefit of the past 15 years is that the design of indicators has addressed some of these shortcomings. The EFA Global Monitoring Report has developed a set of indicators using household survey data that makes it possible to assess progress through the different stages of an education system. This shows, for example, amongst poor rural girls in sub-Saharan Africa in 2010, 61% started school, 23% made it to the end of primary school, and 9% completed secondary school (UNESCO, 2014a).

More broadly, the lesson on indicators is being learnt for the post-2015 goals, with preparations being made to identify appropriate indicators along with the proposals for goals and targets this time around.<sup>4</sup> Such indicators need to present metrics that make it possible to show whether a target has been met, drawing on comparable, robust data. To be effective, they should be easy to communicate in ways that signal action that needs to be taken to achieve the targets. The process of developing such indicators should also start in time to allow changes to targets that are identified as not being measurable – whether due to mis-specification, or lack of available data within the timeframe of the post-2015 goals.

A third lesson for post-2015 relates to one of the greatest failures of the current set of goals, namely for sufficient progress to be evident towards reaching the marginalized. With the exception of the sixth goal on quality of education, all included equity in their language. There are two likely reasons why disadvantaged groups have not sufficiently benefited despite this. One is that the Millennium Development Goals – which have dominated development planning – did not incorporate equity as a core principle, as the EFA goals did. Another is that the lack of measurable equity targets associated with the EFA goals, and insufficient availability of data broken down to show inequalities within countries, has let down the poorest, girls, those with disabilities, and those in rural areas over the past decade.

As a result, until the 2010 EFA Global Monitoring Report, goals were primarily being tracked by looking at average progress across the population. The fact that poor girls living in rural areas of low income countries only spend three years in school, on average, compared with over nine years for rich boys in urban areas, has therefore been hidden (UNESCO, 2014a). This, in turn, has enabled marginalized groups to remain outside the gaze of policymakers, some of whom might feel more comfortable to report national averages so that social inequalities remain obscured (Watkins, 2012). This is precisely why post-2015 goals and targets should take an approach that aims to achieve equity in educational opportunities, tracking progress of the disadvantaged.

The lesson is being learnt, resulting in recent improvements in the availability of disaggregated household survey data and approaches to measurement. In

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<sup>4</sup> A Technical Advisory Group, chaired by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, has been established with responsibility for identifying indicators to track progress towards proposed targets (EFA Steering Committee Technical Advisory Group, 2014).

education, the World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE)<sup>5</sup>, developed by the EFA Global Monitoring Report team, is an example of a tool that is being used by civil society organisations, think tanks and researchers to draw attention to the extent of education inequalities, such that groups who were previously invisible now cannot be ignored by policymakers.

Each of the EFA goals has not received equal attention in part also because the framework did not show sufficient prioritization. As a result, those devising the MDGs narrowed down to those goals that were clear and measurable, namely primary school completion and gender parity in enrolment. This narrowing is widely recognized as resulting in insufficient concern for the quality of education that children receive (Colclough, 2005; Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett, 2006). One aspect of this is that aid donors, and so in turn national governments receiving funds from them, drew on the MDGs rather than the EFA framework to shape their development programmes (King and Rose, 2005a and b).

To avoid the same problem, it is important to place quality more centrally within the next set of goals and targets. This also requires greater attention to clarity, measurability and equity of targets associated with improving quality, while being mindful of potential risks and unintended consequences of such targets, as discussed in the next section of the paper. Failure to do so could not only limit the achievement of the targets themselves, but also further undermine the broader objectives that education systems should seek to accomplish.

### Quality and learning in education goals and targets

The EFA Global Monitoring Report estimates that at least 250 million children are not learning the basics, even though at least half of these have spent at least four years in school (UNESCO, 2014a). This implies that the quality of education is so poor that children are not learning even if they are in school. The poor quality of education affects most those who are already marginalized due to circumstances at birth. These children are more likely to be attending schools that are poorly-resourced, with too few teachers and thus large class sizes, and have dilapidated classrooms lacking basic facilities such as regular electricity supplies. A purpose of global goals should therefore be to turn the spotlight on policy failures of this kind. By drawing attention to the scale of the problem, and the need for governments and the international community to tackle the causes of it, hopefully a future generation of children and young people will be saved from a similar fate.

All of the post-2015 education proposals within the official UN processes include quality and learning in the over-arching goal, with targets identified for improving learning outcomes not just in primary school, but also ensuring that early childhood provides the foundations for future learning. They also extend to

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.education-inequalities.org/>

strengthening learning outcomes in lower secondary education, which is necessary to ensure the wider benefits of education are exploited (Rose, 2014).<sup>6</sup>

While the precise wording varies in different proposals, all include one in the spirit of the second target of the EFA Steering Committee, namely to ensure by 2030: ‘all girls and boys complete free and compulsory quality basic education of at least nine years and achieve relevant learning outcomes, with particular attention to gender equality and the most marginalized’ (EFA Steering Committee, 2014). This target would need to be broken down into different sub-components for measurement purposes. Such a break-down could, for example, disaggregate the target into four stages of access (entry into primary school, completion of primary school, entry into lower secondary school, and completion of lower secondary school). Similarly, learning could be measured both at the stage of completing primary school and completing secondary school. Such a breakdown is desirable to avoid the danger that progress towards the target overall could mask inequalities that emerge early in the system, and impossible to rectify by the age at which children should have completed lower secondary school.

While global measures of access have been used extensively over the past decade, there is not yet a consensus of whether or how universal learning targets could be measured. Some raise legitimate concerns that a focus on a goal expressed only in terms of learning outcomes could have unintended consequences and undesirable side effects for school systems, including by narrowing teaching to preparing children for tests. Teaching to the test could divert attention from the broader purposes of education, which are not easily measurable (Barrett, 2011a and b; Goldstein, 2004). Avoiding this risk could partly be achieved by including learning targets as part of a wider overarching goal, as currently envisaged. Importantly, the overarching goal could also include a target that aims to ensure sufficient number of teachers with relevant training to achieve an appropriate class size across all parts of the country, in ways that will contribute to improvement of learning, including for children living in remote rural areas or urban slums.

An associated problem relates to the difficulty of aligning measurable learning outcomes and broader (potentially unmeasurable) quality processes. This is illustrated from the experience of the sixth EFA goal which begins by stating ‘improving all aspects of quality’ in order that ‘measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills’. However, no indicators were identified for the vague aspiration of ‘improving all

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<sup>6</sup> These official processes include the EFA Steering Committee agreement agreed at Muscat in May 2014 (UNESCO, 2014b); the UN High Level Panel report in May 2013 (United Nations, 2013); the Open Working Group proposal for Sustainable Development Goals in July 2014 (United Nations, 2014a); and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network in June 2014 (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2014).

aspects of quality'. As a result, the EFA Global Monitoring Report has primarily assessed progress towards quality using proxy indicators, most commonly the number of pupils per teacher. In terms of measurement of learning outcomes, this has mainly been confined to richer countries, which are more commonly included in internationally-comparable assessments, such as PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS.<sup>7</sup>

There is a further fear that a global learning target will lead to standardized testing via internationally-set instruments (such as PISA, PIRLS or TIMSS), which in turn could lead to standardized curriculum at the expense of promoting contextually-appropriate approaches. However, a target of ensuring that all children are learning the basics by the end of primary school does not necessarily require global instruments that are standardized for all countries across the world, nor does it require high-stakes tests.

A number of countries have national assessments that include relevant information on learning the basics which are used effectively to strengthen national policy and planning. To give one such example, Brazil's national assessment system, Prova Brasil, is used as a tool to hold schools accountable for the quality of education they provide. Schools use data from the national assessment to develop a strategic plan for achieving expected improvements in learning. The instrument is also used to identify schools that require more support to achieve these objectives (Bruns et al., 2012). For those countries which do not yet have good quality national assessments aimed at identifying whether children are learning, developing a national assessment system that is used as a diagnostic tool would be valuable not only for global monitoring but also for national planning.<sup>8</sup>

Over the past decade there has been a marked improvement in the availability and quality of evidence that can be used to hold policymakers to account, and which have also increasingly been used as a diagnostic tool to strengthen national policies and strategies. Since the 1990s, not only has coverage expanded of international assessments - PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS, and of regional assessments in southern and eastern Africa (SACMEQ), west Africa (PASEC) and Latin America (LLECE), but also on national assessments.<sup>9</sup> The Education Policy

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<sup>7</sup> PISA stands for Programme for International Student Assessment; PIRLS - Progress in International Reading Literacy Study; and TIMSS - Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study.

<sup>8</sup> A distinction should be made between public examinations and national assessments. The aim of a public examination system are primarily used to promote students between levels of an education system, and so benchmarks are set according to the number of school places available. By contrast, a national assessment system aims to establish whether students are reaching the required learning standards expected by the curriculum by a particular age or grade, and how this changes over time and for sub-groups of the population (UNESCO, 2014a).

<sup>9</sup> LLECE stands for Laboratorio Latinoamericano de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación (Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education); PASEC - Programme d'Analyse des Systèmes Educatifs de la CONFEMEN (Programme of Analysis of Education Systems of the CONFEMEN) (Conference of Education Ministers of Countries Using French as a Common Language); and SACMEQ - Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality.

and Data Center (EPDC) has collated national assessment data from over 100 countries, showing how these could be used for assessing progress towards different aspects of learning.<sup>10</sup> The growing availability of data on learning helps to address Jansen's (2005) concern that the pursuit of definitive targets would be best avoided given large data gaps that were apparent when the first EFA Global Monitoring Report was published in 2002. Rather, it seems that greater attention to the importance of data to inform policy has led to a strengthening of information available.

However, the task of collecting good quality data on learning is not yet over – there are still large gaps in data available for some countries, and surveys are not always carried out on a sufficiently regular basis to assess progress. Importantly, also, data are still not systematically collected for some groups of the population, notably people with disabilities often remain invisible. It is encouraging, however, that these gaps are increasingly recognized and steps are being taken to fill them.<sup>11</sup>

There are further arguments that are commonly put forward against a target that aims to ensure children are learning the basics. One is that learning the basics is not sufficiently ambitious. Just as the MDG's focus on access to school was potentially harmful for failure to pay attention to quality, a focus on learning basic skills in mathematics and reading is criticized for ignoring other skills that schools should foster. For this reason, proposals for post-2015 include one for achieving agreed learning standards at lower secondary level, and that all learners acquire knowledge, skills, values and attitudes for global citizenship and sustainable development. Whether and how these could be measured will need work to ensure they do not become the neglected targets of the post-2015 era.

Some of these targets could be measured according to nationally defined standards. This could also help to address concern that quality and learning need to be identified as part of public debate (Tikly and Barrett, 2011). However, relying on nationally-defined targets alone, which depend on the starting points of countries, accepts that global inequalities will be maintained by 2030. At a minimum, it should be viewed as intolerable that global inequalities in learning the basics would remain by this date.

An associated concern of a target related to learning the basics is whether it would be sufficiently transformational, as envisaged by the broader post-2015 framework. Education targets should not be confined to one associated with learning the basics alone, but it should be seen as a necessary foundation for children and young people to acquire other skills, and so to fulfill their aspirations and potential, and for them and their families to escape poverty. Attaining the right to attaining basic skills will, therefore, enable children and

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<sup>10</sup> The intention is that the UNESCO Institute for Statistics will ultimately provide a repository for available data presented in a comparable format, via a Learning Observatory.

<sup>11</sup> The Washington Group on Disability Statistics in particular has made great progress in developing measurement approaches, and integrating them into survey instruments.

families to transform their lives, and contribute to the transformation of societies.

The evidence is clear: those lacking basic literacy and numeracy are unlikely to be able to acquire transferable or technical and vocational skills (UNESCO, 2012). It is, therefore, a necessary first step towards what Barrett (2011b) identifies as a quality basic education that ‘provides boys and girls from all social groups with the opportunity to achieve valued learning outcomes, including those needed for secure and productive livelihoods and to contribute to peaceful and democratic societies’ (p125), and ‘to participate in learning that is inclusive, relevant and democratic’ (p130).

Another criticism that is put forward on a learning target is whether a focus on the basics would lead to attention only being paid to the poorest countries, and so not have universal relevance as intended for post-2015 goals more broadly. While the balance of attention would need to be on the poorest countries, which are furthest behind on any of the current or proposed future goals, even in rich countries some children are failing to learn the basics. A disturbing aspect of this is that children who are identified as failing to learn the basics earlier in the system will not keep pace with their peers later. As such, learning gaps widen, as TIMSS data in England show (UNESCO, 2014a). This is another reason for the need to identify the basics that all children should achieve by the end of primary school, accompanied by effective strategies that tackle learning inequalities early on.

While recognizing the need to prevent unintended consequences, avoiding measurement of learning is not desirable. This would mean that there is no way of knowing whether an education system is enabling all children to learn basic skills – and, if they are not all learning, which children are being left behind. As a result, policymakers are let off the hook, with strategies unlikely to be identified and implemented that tackle the problems that are holding back learning for these children. As such, data are essential to provide policymakers with information on the numbers of children are not in school and not learning, and so as an important first step to devising policies and identifying how resources should be distributed.

From a rights-perspective, a bottom line should therefore be for a universal target that tracks progress for the minimum standards that are expected for any child to reach by the end of a primary cycle regardless of the curriculum and other features of any particular country’s education system. Beyond these universal basics, countries could define higher-order skills needed that are relevant to the country’s education system and economy. As such, a global target should not prevent countries from setting themselves targets above this benchmark, but rather they should be encouraged to do so. But no country should aim below this benchmark, with a principal aim being to ensure all children, regardless of circumstance, complete primary school and achieve a level of literacy and numeracy required to be able to function effectively in

society and have the opportunity to acquire decent jobs.<sup>12</sup> As Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett (2006) argue, this is analogous to the setting of a poverty line of US\$1.25 per day: the hope and intention is that people are far above this poverty line, but this is the minimum level identified required for meeting basic needs. Such a measure has been an important spur for national and international action.

Measuring progress towards all children, regardless of circumstance, completing primary school and learning the basics fulfills the criteria for targets proposed by Langford (2013) – namely that it tackles an urgent issue that deserves to be prioritized, there is strong demand from marginalized groups, and it is a global issue with universal relevance. It also meets the criteria of being measurable while also being politically compelling - what parent, teacher, NGO, company or government could argue against the expectation that schools should at a very minimum prepare children to achieve a basic set of skills by the end of primary school?

The target will enable parents, teachers, NGOs and other stakeholders to put pressure on policymakers to place greater emphasis on targeting strategies and resources towards children who are disadvantaged in education due to circumstances at birth – whether due to poverty, gender, where they live, their ethnicity, or whether they have a disability. Such strategies need to be defined nationally according to a country's context, and be based on an analysis of the processes that create and perpetuate marginalization, which are likely to go beyond education (Aikman and Dyer, 2012; Dyer, 2013).

In defining such strategies, attention is needed to ensure policymakers show commitment to supporting teachers in ways that overcome inequalities within classrooms. It also requires pedagogical approaches that are suited to national and local contexts. As such, achieving a target that all children are learning essentially requires the right mix of national strategies related to teachers, curriculum and assessment in ways that support the most disadvantaged learners. The target would also need to take account of the fact that not all children are currently in school, so measures would be needed to address the barriers they face.

#### Tracking progress to ensure all children, regardless of circumstance, complete primary school and learn the basics by 2030

This section focuses on the sub-component of the second target proposed by the EFA Steering Committee, namely that all children, regardless of circumstance, complete primary school and learn the basics by 2030, it will be necessary to define what is meant by learning 'the basics'. It should be made clear that the basics by the end of primary school should go beyond merely reading a sentence, or doing simple sums. Learning assessments commonly adopt their own definitions of basic skills children are expected to achieve within them, but there

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<sup>12</sup> As Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett (2006) note, this is analogous to the setting of a poverty line of US\$1.25 per day. The hope and intention would be for people to be far above this poverty line, but this is the minimum amount identified that is needed for meeting basic needs.

are items within these assessments that allow for comparability across these surveys.<sup>13</sup> In SACMEQ tests, for example, it is possible to identify whether a child is able to interpret meaning 'by matching words and phrases, completing a sentence, or matching adjacent words in a short and simple text by reading on or reading back, associated with a basic level of literacy'. The 'basic' numeracy level reflects the ability of pupils to translate 'verbal information presented in a sentence, simple graph or table using one arithmetic operation in several repeated steps' (SACMEQ, 2010, page 8 – cited in Altinok, 2012).

Turning to the question whether such a sub-target would be sufficiently aspirational, for some countries reaching this level would be extremely ambitious if it is to be achieved for all social and economic groups in the population. In low income countries, disadvantaged groups such as the poorest rural girls are only expected to complete primary school in 2086 on recent trends – and it will take even longer for all of them not only to complete school but also be learning the basics once there (UNESCO, 2014a).

An important feature of the sub-target aimed at ensuring all children are learning the basics is that it needs to take account of both children in and out of school.<sup>14</sup> In general, learning assessments only take account of those in school. For most high income countries included in PISA's international assessments this is not a problem, since the majority of 15-year olds (the age group tested in PISA) complete secondary school.

However, as PISA extends to other countries, presenting information only on those in school can be misleading. For example, Viet Nam, which joined PISA in 2012, is praised for achieving high levels of learning for those in school. Its results are comparable to richer countries such as Finland, and show similar outcomes for students from rich and poor backgrounds.<sup>15</sup> However, this does not take account of the fact that fewer than two-thirds of young people from poor households in Viet Nam complete secondary school, while the vast majority from rich households do so.<sup>16</sup> Assuming that those not staying in school are unlikely to have reached the minimum thresholds for learning set by PISA, Viet Nam's inequality gap would drop to look more like Chile, where the majority of the rich learn but only two-thirds of the poor do so.

This problem starts much earlier in the education system for poorer countries given the large numbers of children are still failing even to complete primary school. It is, therefore, important for any target on learning not only to start with

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<sup>13</sup> The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics are identifying such items that would allow comparability across available assessments.

<sup>14</sup> This point is also emphasized by Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett (2006) and Spaul and Taylor (2012).

<sup>15</sup> See the World Inequality Database on Education: [http://www.education-inequalities.org/indicators/mlevel1#?sort=mean&dimension=wealth\\_quintile&group=|Quintile%205|Quintile%201&age\\_group=mlevel1\\_3&countries=all](http://www.education-inequalities.org/indicators/mlevel1#?sort=mean&dimension=wealth_quintile&group=|Quintile%205|Quintile%201&age_group=mlevel1_3&countries=all)

<sup>16</sup> See the World Inequality Database on Education: [http://www.education-inequalities.org/countries/vietnam-64/indicators/comp\\_lowsec#?dimension=all&group=all&age\\_group=|comp\\_lowsec&year=|2010](http://www.education-inequalities.org/countries/vietnam-64/indicators/comp_lowsec#?dimension=all&group=all&age_group=|comp_lowsec&year=|2010)

tracking progress towards achieving the basics by the time they should have completed primary school, but to take into account children in the relevant age group who are not in school.

As with all post-2015 targets, one on learning should be tracked for disadvantaged groups. It will be important to identify whether progress for these groups is being made such that they are on track to achieve it by 2030. Doing so will also show whether the gap between more advantaged and disadvantaged groups is closing. Tracking progress in this way is important to overcome Jansen's (2005) concern related to 'politics of performance' where targets might otherwise incentivize governments to ignore under-resourced schools and poor learners. By tracking their progress, the spotlight will be put on the need to redistribute resources to disadvantaged groups, allowing them to be put on a more equal footing to acquire further skills.

To provide an illustration of how progress for disadvantaged groups could be tracked using a learning indicator in countries that are likely to be amongst those most off-track, information on population groups for which disaggregated data are available in five countries<sup>17</sup> in east and southern Africa are combined with data from demographic and health household surveys to identify the proportions for different population groups who complete primary school. Based on the data available on children who are both in school and learning, poor rural girls are identified in the countries as the least likely to be achieving the basics by grade 6 (the last grade of primary school for most of these countries).

Starting by looking at those who are in school, and so are included in the SACMEQ assessment, by 2007 80% of rich boys living in urban areas pass the minimum threshold in reading. By contrast, only 60% of poor girls living in rural parts of these countries who are in school are reaching this level of learning (Figure 1A). The good news is that, not only has there been an increase in the proportion learning in these countries, but also that progress has been faster for the more disadvantaged children in school. This has resulted in a slight narrowing of the learning gap between them and the higher-performing group from 27% in 2000 to 20% in 2007 (the latest year of data available).

[figure 1 about here]

However, the picture is less promising once account is taken of those not in school by grade 6 (Figure 1B). Given that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are considerably more likely to be out of school, the learning gap that takes account both of those in and out of school is considerably wider, showing a 37 percentage point difference between the two groups in 2007. And over this period the learning gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups of children both in and out of school remained largely unchanged. By 2007, almost two-thirds of all rich boys in urban areas were reaching the minimum

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<sup>17</sup> The five countries included in the analysis are Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Uganda, using SACMEQ data.

benchmark in reading compared with just around one-quarter of poor girls in rural areas. This suggests that little progress was made in successfully targeting policies to improve both access and quality for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, with only an increase of only seven percentage points over the period.

If the same rates of progress as observed between 2000 and 2007 were to continue into the future, only half of poor rural girls would be expected to reach minimum learning levels by 2030 (Figure 1B). As a result, in 15 years' time, half would still be denied their right to a quality of education that enables them to reach even the lowest level of acceptable learning by the end of primary school. Unless targeted strategies are put in place to change this, by the deadline of the next set of goals we will still be debating why inequalities remain even for the most basic rights.

To increase the chances of success, Watkins' (2014) proposal of a 'stepping stone' approach should be adopted for post-2015 goals such that interim targets are set to ensure equity gaps are narrowed over time. This would overcome problems of limiting to a one-off target which delays the identification of their success or otherwise until a distant date. Using such an approach for a target that aims to ensure all children are learning the basics provides a stark illustration of the challenges ahead for this group of countries. It shows the need for a steep increase in achievement for marginalized groups to enable them to catch up, and so ultimately achieve a learning target along with other groups in the population.

While a more-or-less linear improvement in learning outcomes for rich boys in urban areas would enable them to reach the target by 2030, sub-targets for poor, rural girls would need to be set at a more ambitious rate. Between 2008 and 2030, annual progress would need to be more than three-times the rate observed between 2000 and 2007 (Figure 1B).

Adopting interim targets would suggest that, by 2020, the proportion of poor girls in rural areas learning the basics would need to reach 55% - exceeding the rate that they are only currently expected to achieve by 2030, if trends continue. This interim target is more than double the 26% learning in 2007. By 2025, at least 75% would need to have reached the threshold. By this date all children would need to have started school, and they would all need to stay through to completion to ensure the target of all children learning the basics by the end of the primary cycle were achieved.

In tracking progress, it is important not only to look at aggregates across groups of countries, but also the challenges facing individual countries. Comparisons show that the challenges are considerable for countries furthest from the current set of goals (Figure 2). In Malawi, a mere 7% of poor, rural girls were reaching the minimum benchmark by 2007 – if recent trends continue, only reach 22% of these children would be learning the basics by 2030.

Tanzania provides a more hopeful picture, with faster than average progress for poor, rural girls such that around one-third were learning the basics by 2007. In

total, Tanzania's progress is equivalent to around 1.5 million additional children learning the basics. Based on the recent progress for the most disadvantaged group, the proportion of them learning the basics could reach almost three-quarters by 2030. An important reason for Tanzania's faster rate of progress is due to commitment of government resources to education, with attention paid to strategies aimed at reaching disadvantaged groups (UNESCO, 2014a).

[figure 2 about here]

Available data from countries that face some of the greatest challenges in getting all children into school and learning the basics show that there has been some progress since the EFA framework was established. This is perhaps contrary to expectations given concerns that rapid increases in enrolment have been at the expense of quality. However progress will need to be accelerated, particularly for the most disadvantaged groups, if even this fundamental foundation to further skills and opportunities is to be achieved for all children by 2030.

### Conclusion

The reality that at least 250 million children are failing to learn the basics is widely recognized to represent a global learning crisis. Based on the view that post-2015 goals should focus on universal rights, with particular attention to those who otherwise are likely to be left behind, this paper argues in favour of goals that are clear and measurable, with equity at their heart. As part of a global framework, it identifies an approach for measuring progress towards a target to ensure that, at a minimum, the most disadvantaged children both complete primary school and are learning the basic in literacy and numeracy by 2030. Interim stepping-stones targets are proposed to make sure sufficient progress is made throughout the 15-year period. It will then be possible to identify whether the High Level Panel's call that 'Targets will only be considered achieved if they are met for all relevant income and social groups.' is reached (United Nations, 2013: 17).

Such a target should not be viewed as independent of others that are also needed (such as on early childhood, lower secondary or adult literacy). Nor should any of these targets be viewed as an end in themselves – but rather a necessary part of identifying and implementing strategies that ensure education systems have strong foundations in teaching and pedagogy in place from the early years with a focus on the most disadvantaged, which are then maintained throughout. This will ensure that measuring progress towards a learning target for different sub-groups of the population achieves its purpose of holding policymakers to account for putting in place strategies to support the quality of education of disadvantaged groups. Only then can we hope to ensure that another generation of children and young people are not let down by poor quality education that is failing even to allow them to learn the basics.

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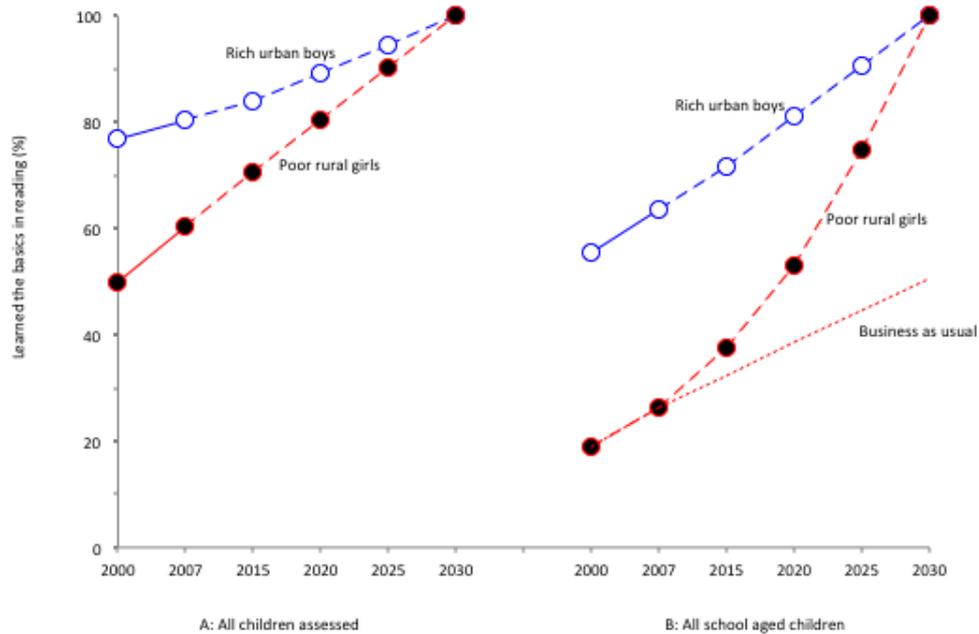
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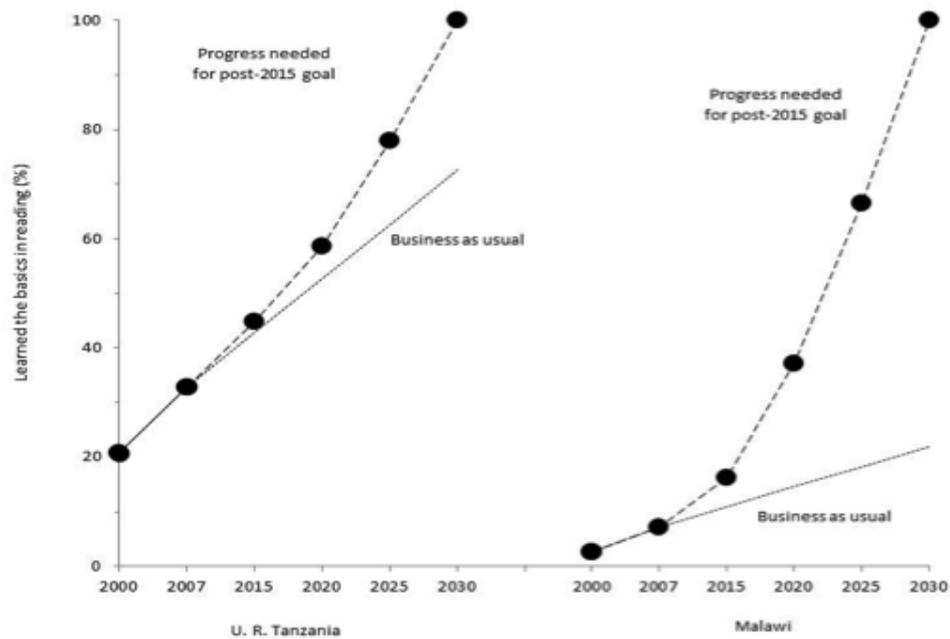
## Figures

Figure 1 A and B: Tracking progress towards all children learning the basics by 2030 in five east and southern African countries



Sources: SACMEQ, 2000 and 2007. Demographic and health surveys.

Figure 2 A and B: Tracking progress towards poor, rural girls learning the basics by 2030 in Malawi and Tanzania



Sources: SACMEQ, 2000 and 2007. Demographic and health surveys

