Post-2015 Global Thematic Consultation on Education
Summary Report of the e-Discussion on the Quality of Learning

Background

The e-discussion on quality of learning ran from 8 to 25 January 2013 and was co-moderated by UNICEF, UNCESCO, Education International, CIDA and OECD. A total of **171 contributions** including the moderators' inputs were posted on the website. The discussion aimed to yield examples of practices and experiences as well as opinions from a broad group of global online participants about the measures and policies needed to improve quality of learning in both formal and non-formal education; major obstacles to quality education in different regions of the world and their determinant factors; and recommendations on improving the quality of learning as well as policy implications for the Post-2015 development agenda. The discussion had also attempted to identify how learning outcomes should be measured and how measurement of learning could improve education quality.

This summary is structured around the following: how the participants defined quality of learning; the main obstacles in improving the quality; policies and interventions to improve quality; measures that are necessary to support quality of learning for the most marginalised groups; roles of different education and other stakeholders in improving quality of learning; and, the implications for education goals in the post-2015 development agenda.

Defining the quality of learning and measuring learning outcomes

Participants of the discussion took a holistic approach in defining the competence that people need to acquire throughout their lives. For many, this meant **balancing foundational skills**, such as literacy and numeracy, **with broader outcomes** such as creativity, problem-solving and life skills, as well as employability and active citizenship. Similarly, several contributors called for an emphasis on "learning to learn", where educational systems stimulate critical thinking, curiosity and interdisciplinary

approaches, while encouraging students to develop their own learning strategies.

Some contributors cited the call of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for education to be "directed to the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms".

> "While we accept the need for schools and politicians to be able to document achievement, we also believe that new approaches are required for assessment and that measures of achievement must be broader than just academic scores."
> **Anna-Sophie Trolle**

Accordingly, learning outcomes ought to be analysed in terms of their relevance and applicability in a broader societal context - considering to what extent they support employment, citizenship and social cohesion while combating inequality and discrimination.

There was also a call for the more holistic concept of **life-long learning**. While much of the global debate has focused on primary education, comparatively little attention has been paid to other levels of education. Some contributors thus elevated the importance of **early childhood education** to a basic right to education. Similar comments were received for **secondary education and vocational training**, and their role in developing crucial skills. When considering employability, several contributors underlined the importance of career guidance with integrated practical work experience. Other contributors emphasized **adult education** efforts, particularly promoting adult literacy.

Contributors warned against **defining quality only in terms of completion rates** and the number of students who continue studying. Some contributors also warned against **unnecessary testing** – while quantitative measures may be necessary at some levels, great care needed to be taken in recognising that education is a uniquely individual and, in some respects, "immeasurable" experience. These contributors thus

called for educational systems to move beyond narrow curriculum-based testing to **more broad-based measures of learning quality** and developing a qualitative understanding of the learning process. *"The challenge lies on setting progressive benchmarks for learning while accounting for contextual differences as well as the diversity of and within education systems" (European Youth Forum)*. These changes would also require a better understanding of non-formal education as a complement to formal education.

When measuring learning quality, several contributors pointed to the need for **global indicators to take into account cultural and social contexts**. Countries would need to define their own targets and minimum standards, based on contextual factors such as poverty levels, or the financial and human resources available to promote progress. However, there were several contributors who appeared to agree that some aspects of basic education, such as literacy, numeracy, critical thinking and life skills, could be promoted through universal learning standards.

The main obstacles in improving the quality of learning

Contributors identified a wide range of obstacles to quality learning. **Poverty** was regarded as a major reason for lack of access to education, or dropping out of school. This was in part due to **tuition fees** and the **indirect costs of education** (e.g. learning materials, uniforms and school meals), but also related to malnutrition and poor living conditions.

For **the most marginalised and socially excluded groups**, and for people with special educational needs, such challenges are compounded by insufficient support for access to quality learning. While the global Education for All goals had included a focus on equity, the targets and indicators had not allowed for sufficient monitoring of progress for the most disadvantaged groups. Moreover, while the Millennium Development Goals had focused attention on equitable access to education, little attention had been paid to equity in the context of the quality of learning.

Several contributors cited **lacking political will, low administrative capacity and corruption** as factors preventing improvements in the quality of learning. Without adequate governance and policy reforms investments in education would stagnate or be captured by competing political agendas.

Many contributors pointed to the **lack of favourable learning environments**. Contributors noted lack of or inappropriate school infrastructure (e.g. desks, classrooms and buildings), teaching materials and books, unmanageable class sizes as well as insufficient access to libraries and cultural institutions.

They also pointed to the crucial **shortage of qualified teachers**. Quality would not improve without efforts to attract good teachers with appropriate salaries and working conditions and in the absence of sufficient teacher training towards more up-to-date learning methods. Contributors cited the spread of unqualified teachers on short-term contracts, with little training or support. They also highlighted the challenges of keeping teacher-student ratios manageable and ensuring that students were placed in appropriate grades.

Policies and interventions needed to improve quality

A large number of contributors called for **comprehensive and robust education policies**, promoting up-to-date competence-based curricula, adequate school infrastructure, adequate learning materials and a qualified teaching force. Alongside policy reform, this would also require increased public financial support for education and strong monitoring systems to ensure the effective use and equitable distribution of funding.

> "In Malawi, government in 2004 developed what is called National Strategy for strengthening Community Participation in Primary School Management. This strategy has helped various stakeholders in coordinating and responding to school needs in a holistic manner. So, a similar approach should be undertaken for quality issue."
> **Limbani Nsapato, Lusaka, Zambia**

Special emphasis was placed on the **needs of the most marginalised and hard-to reach** children and young people. As one example among many proposals, contributors called for teaching to be conducted in appropriate languages, including not only the national language but also students' mother tongues.

The **quality of teaching and teacher training** received particular attention, with contributors calling for governments to invest in pre-service and in-service training. Teachers needed continuous professional development, for example to familiarise them with new methods and priorities, such as ICT and gender-sensitive education. Several contributors drew attention to the importance of new pedagogical approaches, such as student-centred learning, peer learning and experimental learning.

Alongside training, good **working conditions and salaries** were needed to attract good teachers at all levels, including early childhood and secondary education. At

the same time, some respondents advocated for better **evaluation mechanisms** to ensure teacher accountability, and called for teachers to adhere to professional codes of ethics.

Measures necessary to support quality of learning for the most marginalised groups

A large number of contributors focused on the need to support **marginalised groups**, including girls and women, ethnic and other minorities, children in care, the disabled, refugees and internally displaced persons, and child soldiers. Hard-to-reach schools were also cited as needing support in order to overcome disparities between urban and rural schools.

> "In conflict-affected and fragile settings, it is particularly crucial that education is sensitive to its surroundings, for a "conflict-blind" education may have a negative impact on the stability of a country, or a conflict…Thus, education programmes in such settings must be conflict-sensitive and both minimize negative impacts and maximize positive impacts, to overcome these obstacles."
> **Noemi Gerber**

Contributors highlighted that the challenge was particularly acute where children were affected by **emergencies and conflicts**, in need of physical protection and psychosocial support, as well as life-saving information, conflict resolution and peace-building efforts. They also drew attention to the potential for **multiple layers of discrimination**, such as those experienced by women with disabilities, children with disabilities living in rural areas, or among indigenous or ethnic minority groups.

Moreover, they were called on to provide special support where necessary, including in promoting a supportive home environment – involving children in household-related work was identified as a potential source of inequality. In the area of supporting **gender equality**, contributors proposed efforts to improve safety and security in and around schools, provide teacher training in gender-sensitive education, and consider a 50-50 selection policy into government schools.

Several contributors suggested a **holistic and rights-based approach to equitable quality education**, *"…regardless of the curriculum and contexts in different countries" (Evelyn Núñez)*, with equity constituting a cross-cutting element in all education policies and practices, including teacher training programmes, curricular design and assessment, the provision of materials and the design of school infrastructure.

The contributions suggested **the need for more evidence and disaggregated data**, arguing that some groups remained invisible in, for example, household

surveys. Such evidence would help develop a better understanding of the situation of different marginalised or vulnerable groups, allow their situation to be monitored more closely, and underpin more supportive policies and practices.

Role of different actors to improve quality

Contributors highlighted the **overarching responsibilities of governments** in upholding constitutional and international commitments, providing quality education for all and protecting children's rights. Fighting poverty and malnutrition, eliminating disparities, improving governance and combating corruption were cited as priorities for educational systems as much as for economies as a whole. Some contributors underlined the need for particular efforts in conflict-affected regions or emergencies. Moreover, governments promoting inclusive education needed to ensure that education was affordable.

Contributors also discussed responsibilities of various **school-based stakeholders**, with some highlighting the importance of trust and respect among students and teachers in a democratic classroom environment. This required policies and training in the areas of conflict mitigation and peace building,

> "A meaningful context for an adult teacher is not necessarily as meaningful for a young learner. It is highly desirable that the context in which the learning is developed is the same as the context in which the knowledge is to be used. If at all possible, in-school learning should be related to out-of-school learning and other experiences."
> **Md. Zillur Rahman Siddiki**

anti-bullying and the prevention of harassment. More generally, contributors stressed the importance of engaging with parents, parents associations, teachers and student unions, and communities in improving quality education and supporting school management.

Civil society was called upon to play a strategic role in monitoring government action, including the provision and equitable distribution of public funds for education, the design and implementation of education policy and curriculum, and the governance of education. Civil society could also help ensure that assessment of learning outcomes meet broader societal needs, in line with a more holistic concept of quality learning. Contributors also underlined the role of civil society in supporting different minority groups, for example by raising awareness about their rights, offering them non-formal education and extra-curricular activities, and promoting innovative pedagogical approaches to address their needs.

The **private sector** was also held to have an important role in promoting quality education. By participating

actively in the education policy debate, the private sector could, for example, help identify skills needs for the economy and propose ways in which the private sector can contribute to improved learning quality. Workplace learning was mentioned, as was the engagement of the private sector in vocational training and education. The private sector was also called upon to help deliver quality education through financial, material and/or technical support. In the event that the private sector was contributing to the delivery of educational services, contributors also called for accountability mechanisms to ensure that actions were in line with overall national policies. Finally, contributors also mentioned the opportunity of private sector grants for continuous study.

Other specific stakeholders identified by contributors included **academia**, with its role of informing the design of policies with educational research and evidence, including best practices. They also included the **media**, which had a crucial role in awareness-raising about educational quality and the dissemination of best practice.

Finally, contributors also discussed the role of the **multilateral system** and **international donor community**. The former was identified as being well-placed to facilitate global discussions on education indicators, disseminate best practices, provide guidance and technical assistance and advocate the development of standards. The latter was called on to support country-based efforts through technical and financial assistance for government, civil society and community institutions, including those supporting marginalised groups.

At all stages, collaboration was needed with all stakeholder groups, including civil society, the private sector, teacher organisations, and parents and communities. Parents and communities, for example, could help the curriculum reflect social and cultural needs and achieve high ambitions in learning quality.

The implications for education goals in a post-2015 development agenda

The e-discussion reinforced the need for **free-standing and specific education goals** in the post-MDG framework, with contributors defining education not only as a fundamental human right, but also as a basis for respecting and achieving other human rights and global goals.

There was strong support for **inclusive education and equitable learning** to be at the heart of a post-2015 global development framework, need for *"…a bottom-up approach that galvanizes community and society's support to improve learning followed by policies that tracked to support children's learning." (**Alisa Philips**)*

Some contributions called for post-MDG goals, targets and indicators to co-exist with a set of streamlined EFA goals. All goals would need to be **clearly articulated** and to hold governments **accountable**. They would also need to be **adaptable to different contexts** – there was no more room for one-size-fits-all approaches. In order to stimulate improvements in learning quality, learning goals could be coupled with sub-indicators and accompanied by guidance on policy and best practices.

In order to **integrate the holistic approaches to learning quality** described above, goals would need to protect the right to education at all educational levels and include consideration for out-of-school, non-formal and informal learning. Goals would also need to recognise a broader concept of learning – not solely based on the acquisition of curricular knowledge and traditional skills, but **integrating "life skills"** needed in the XXI century.

Contributors proposed a diverse list of **both quantitative and qualitative indicators**, covering inputs, process and outcomes. These covered legislation, public financing for education, school infrastructure, the availability of equipment and materials (e.g. textbook-pupil ratios), work conditions of teachers, learning conditions (e.g. teacher-student ratios).

Other proposed indicators would measure the different dimensions of **the right to education**, such as availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability. Examples included minimum percentages for the enrolment of girls, and minimum completion rates for both girls and boys at all educational levels and at expected graduation ages. Proposals underlined the importance of **disaggregated data.** In terms of **skills indicators**, proposals included indicators for basic skills (e.g. literacy and numeracy in different age groups), as well as indicators assessing the ability of people to use and apply knowledge in different contexts, use meta-cognitive and interpersonal skills, and contribute to active citizenship.

As a final general principle, contributors strongly encouraged a **broad post-2015 education dialogue** among all stakeholders at local, national, regional and international levels.