

RECOUP Working Paper 2

Global Gender Goals and the Construction of Equality: Conceptual Dilemmas and Policy Practice

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Abstract

The achievement of gender equality in education, and of women's empowerment more generally, have recently become established amongst the highest international priorities for policy action. This paper examines the processes by which they came to be included amongst the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It argues that the revised targets to 2015 are more practicable than earlier goals. However, it shows that rates of progress will need to be improved, and that financial support from the north is still running at less than half the required levels. Goal achievement presupposes some agreed understanding of the meaning of gender equality. The paper reveals important contradictions between the language of analysis and the vocabulary of policy. Finally, it examines some of the instruments available for monitoring progress and building pressure for policy reform. It shows that failures to meet policy undertakings are as evident – and as serious in their implications for the possibility of achieving the MDGs – amongst aid donors as they are amongst developing-country governments themselves.

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Keywords: education, international aid, gender equality, women's empowerment, Millennium Development Goals

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1. Introduction

The Millennium Declaration, issued in the year 2000, committed the nations of the world to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, as part of a set of wide-ranging measures to halve the incidence of poverty over the first 15 years of the new century. The commitments made to tackle gender inequality in education are specific and time-bound, and appear to provide a clear agenda for action and policy change. In this paper I first examine the process by which these gender goals became established. I then attempt to disentangle the meanings, and the theoretical underpinning of their various formulations. In the final section I assess the feasibility of their attainment and the actual/potential roles of the international community in this process

2. The Place of Gender in International Development Goals

The basis for a global commitment to gender equality in education has been built in some detail over the past 35 years. This has had two 'arms'. Firstly, a series of international human rights treaties has been adopted and ratified by the great majority of countries which requires states to make education universally available, and to pursue educational policies which do not discriminate on the grounds of gender².

Notwithstanding this apparent global near-consensus, the simple ratification of these treaties by governments does not imply that the necessary rights obligations will be observed. To help secure such observance, a reporting procedure is in place which is meant to allow the relevant UN treaty organisations to be informed of progress made. In recent years, however, about one third of the ratifying states have not submitted such reports (Tomasevski, 2003). This prevents reliable international assessments of progress being made, and the treaty obligations are widely ignored in many of these cases.

Partly in response to this patchy implementation, a second 'arm' has comprised a series of international declarations issued under the auspices of the United Nations. These, as summarised in Table 1 below, have followed from the World Conferences on Education for All (1990), on Population and Development (1994), on Women (1995) and on Social Development

² In addition to three earlier human rights treaties, these include the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which came into force in 1981 and 1990, respectively. Both of these include specific requirements to guarantee non-discriminatory rights of access to, and provision of education.

(1995) and provide separate commitments on the part of all signatories, to provide universal education and to protect and promote the rights of women in education and throughout society³.

Table 1: Evolution of development goals in education - from Jomtien to the MDGs

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Target date</i>
1990	WCEFA	UPE	2000
1994	ICPD	UPE	before 2015
		Primary gender parity	before 2015
1995	FWCW UPE		2015
		Primary gender parity	2005
1995	WSSD	Prim/sec gender parity	2005
2000	WEF	UPE	2015
		Prim/sec gender parity	2005
		Gender equality in education	2015
2000	UN Summit	UPE	2015
		Prim/sec gender parity	2005
		All levels gender parity	2015

Note - acronyms represent the following events:

WCEFA – World Conference on Education for All, Jomtien, Thailand

ICPD – International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, Egypt

FECW – Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China

WSSD – World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, Denmark

WEF – World Education Forum, Dakar, Senegal

UN Summit – UN Millennium Summit, New York, USA.

Some of these commitments were brought together by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD in 1996 as part of a broader attempt to set up targets for

³ For more discussion of these parallel legal and political processes, and of the specific undertakings made by signatories to the agreements, see Colclough (2005). A detailed description of the rights to education and to gender equality specified by international treaties and declarations is given in UNESCO (2003), Appendix 1.

international development. In May of that year, the DAC adopted a new development strategy⁴ for global progress which embraced many of the development targets – including those on education and on gender equality - which had emerged from the UN Summits earlier in the decade. As part of this strategy a limited number of indicators were proposed for monitoring progress towards the targets. Subsequently, many donors incorporated these principles into their aid policies, and many also began to see the International Development Targets (IDTs) as crucial objectives for the assessment of development success.

This process was further formalised at the 2000 UN Millennium Summit, when world leaders, from rich and poor countries alike, adopted a set of eight time-bound goals that, when achieved, were expected to halve poverty worldwide by 2015⁵. The first seven of these goals gave commitments to cut the incidence of poverty and hunger, get every child into school, empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases, and ensure environmental sustainability. The eighth goal recognized that to achieve the first seven goals significantly more - and more effective - aid, sustainable debt relief and fairer trade rules would be required throughout the fifteen-year period to 2015. Targets for education were specifically incorporated within two of these eight goals: the second expressed a commitment to achieve universal primary education (UPE) by 2015 (defined in terms of the completion of a ‘full course of primary schooling’); the third goal, which is concerned to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment, included a specific target for the elimination of gender disparities in education over the same period.

By the turn of the century, therefore, a broadly-based consensus promoting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as objectives for development policy appeared to have been established amongst the group of nations, organisations and agencies that are often collectively referred to as ‘the international community’. Formally, this ‘community’ might be taken to comprise representatives of the 200 or so member states of the United Nations and their dependent territories. In fact, however, representatives of a small group of richer nations, and in particular of the G8 countries, have always had a major influence on the formation and application of development policy-orthodoxy. Such influence stems mainly from their economic power, their consequentially dominant voices in international trade and debt negotiations, and their roles as main providers of international aid for development purposes. They control appointments to the leadership of many of the multilateral development agencies, in particular the World Bank and the IMF, and much of the economic and social research which informs their

⁴ OECD DAC (1996).

⁵ A detailed account of the transition from IDTs to MDGs is given by White and Black (2004).

position on development policy is conducted by residents of these countries. Notions of what comprises 'good' development policy have changed over the past half century, from preoccupations with maximising growth via various forms of state intervention, to a much greater concern with the alleviation of poverty in the context of more liberal economic policy regimes. These shifts in policy-emphasis have, in turn, reflected the main changes in economic orthodoxy within industrialised countries - away from the Keynesian state-interventionist models of the 1960s and 1970s, to more neo-liberal, market-oriented forms of economic management in recent years. State actions are now encouraged (quintessentially by the MDGs) to focus more upon the provision of basic services, and aid agencies have been willing to support those endeavours, where 'sound' economic management of the broader economy is in place.

In this context, the appeal of the MDGs from the perspective of aid-providers was that they provided a check-list of quantifiable objectives for state action, and a set of shorthand criteria for assessing whether major progress with poverty reduction is being made. It appeared that the efficacy of policy reform in developing countries was to be judged in their terms. If it could be shown that national development policies – including those affecting gender equality - were designed to deliver the 2015 goals, they would, by implication, attract sufficient support from aid agencies to help them be secured. Such expectations, however, are as yet far from being met.

The Dakar EFA Goals: a Crucial Addendum to the MDGs

Also in 2000, a World Education Forum was convened by UNESCO in Dakar, Senegal, with the objectives of reviewing and extending the global commitments for educational progress. The meeting agreed on six 'Education for All' (EFA) goals, which were considered not only essential, but also attainable and affordable, given the presence of the necessary international resolve. The resulting 'Dakar Framework for Action' declared that by 2015, all children of primary-school age would participate in free schooling of acceptable quality, that adult illiteracy would be halved, that progress would be made in providing early childhood care and education, and that learning opportunities for youth and adults and all aspects of education quality would be improved. One of these 'Dakar' goals also committed the nations of the world to

eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and

equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality (UNESCO, 2000a, paragraph 7).

The Dakar conference resolution even went so far as to promise that ‘no countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by a lack of resources’ (UNESCO, 2000a). Thus, industrialised countries seemed to be saying, for the first time, that resources for achieving EFA – mediated by the MDG goals – would be available to all those who needed them. Subsequent progress, however, has been modest. For example, between 2000 and 2004, aid to basic education in developing countries increased by around two-thirds, from \$2.6 billion to around \$4.4 billion.⁶ Although this might seem substantial, it compares poorly with an *additional* \$6 billion annual aid that was estimated to be needed for all children to be enrolled in primary school over the years to 2015⁷. Accordingly in the first few years after the MDG/Dakar conferences, aid to basic education increased by less than one-third of the annual amount required to meet the UPE and gender goals. More recent estimates now put the size of the gap at around \$9-10 billion (in 2005 prices) from 2005 onwards, mainly reflecting the slow start to increased aid flows since the start of the new century (DFID/HM Treasury, 2005). Notwithstanding the new enthusiasm demonstrated by G8 representatives at the Gleneagles meetings in 2006, it is unlikely that such resources will be forthcoming either in a timely fashion, or using modalities appropriate to the scale of actions required. This partly stems from the immense practical difficulties involved in rapidly scaling up aid programmes. In addition, however, the ‘sound economic management’ conditionalities required by aid agencies, mentioned earlier, themselves explain why some of the most needy states – being also the most ‘unsoundly’ managed – will not be early recipients of the aid resources they require.

3. Towards Gender Equality in Education: Concepts and Feasibility⁸

Both the Dakar gender goal and the MDG gender target aimed to achieve parity in primary and secondary enrolments by 2005. Yet when these goals were agreed, in 2000, it was

⁶ These estimates are in constant 2003 prices (UNESCO 2006, p. 89)

⁷ See UNESCO (2002, pp 133-163). This source estimates additional aid requirements of £5.6bn. in 2000 prices, which would amount to about \$6 bn in 2003 prices.

⁸ In an earlier paper (Colclough, 2004) I identified the main cost and national expenditure constraints to achieving UPE, concluding that the 2015 targets are achievable, subject to national governments introducing new efficiency measures, increasing educational expenditures and promoting a range of quality and demand-side reforms. The aid requirements were also specified. Here, the discussion of feasibility is based upon a concern with more conceptual matters, and with the types of theoretical understanding presupposed by UN discourse.

already clear that that objective could simply not be achieved. In order to do so, over the five intervening years, large numbers of out-of-school girls would have needed to enrol in (or rejoin) classes at levels well beyond primary grade 1. Such ‘mid-career’ enrolment would have been extensively required if secondary enrolment parity were to have been achieved within a five-year period, at least in those many school systems in which male pupils significantly outnumbered girls at all grade levels. This kind of enrolment behaviour would have been unsustainable over the medium term and, in most countries, it would not have been feasible in the first place.

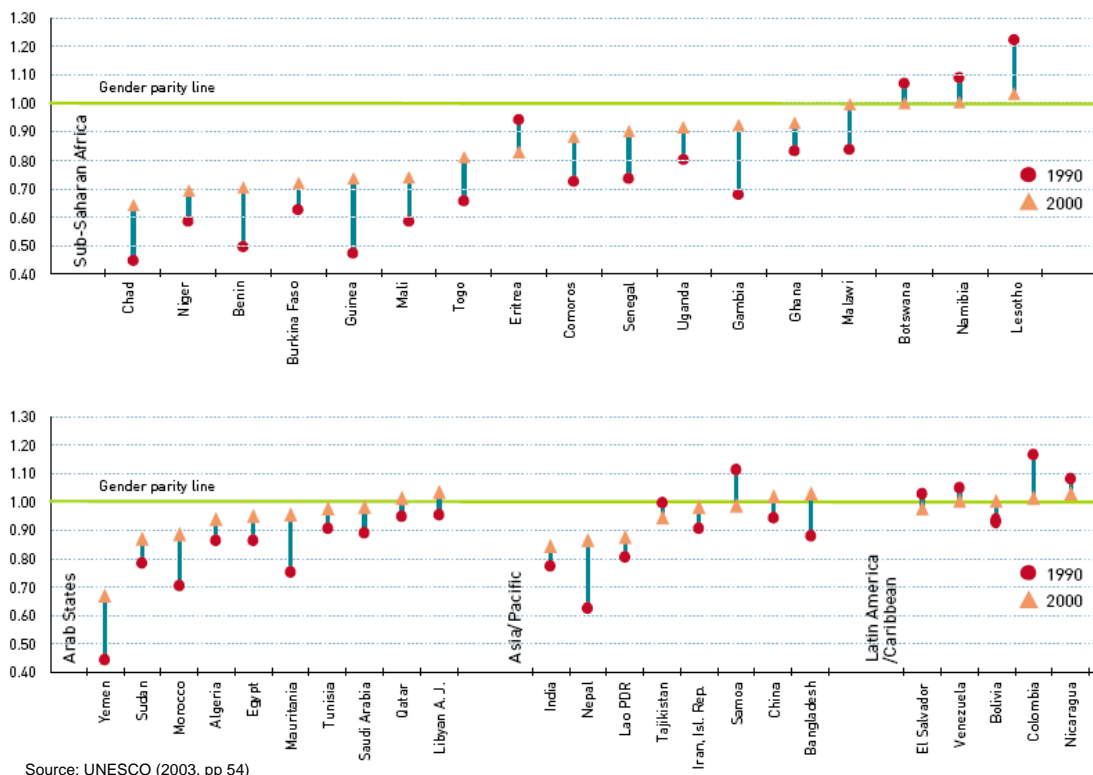
The international community has made a habit of setting unrealistic target dates for the achievement of its educational goals. From Table 1, it can be seen that each of the targets set for 2000 or 2005 envisaged an impossibly rapid reform agenda: achieving universal primary education over 10 years from 1990, or gender parity of enrolments over 5 to 10 years from 1995 or from 2000 were infeasible tasks. It had, for example, taken 30 years for primary enrolments in developing countries to increase from half to three quarters of all children of primary-school age by 1990. Enrolments would have had to double in Sub-Saharan Africa, and to triple in many countries in the region, if all children were to be enrolled by the century’s end⁹.

Similarly, it had taken almost two decades for female enrolments to increase from 79 per cent to 84 per cent of those of males by the late 1990s¹⁰. Progress towards gender parity in enrolments can be represented by a ‘gender parity index’ (GPI). This simply expresses the gross (or net) enrolment ratio (GER) for girls at any given level of the education system, as a proportion of the same ratio for boys. Thus, if the primary GER for girls is 95 and that for boys is 100, the primary-level GPI would be 0.95. It follows that gender parity is indicated by a GPI value of 1.0. Figure 1, below, shows those countries where changes in GPIs exceeded 5 percentage points over the decade 1990-2000. Although good progress towards parity was made in a significant number of cases, in only 16 countries was there an improvement in the GPI of greater than 10 percentage points over the decade. Yet, by the year 2000, 38 countries still had primary GPIs of less than 0.90. Some 22 of these were in Sub-Saharan Africa, where gender inequality of enrolments remained extreme in many cases – half of them having GPI values of less than 0.70. Accordingly, a universal move to gender parity over a five-year period from 2000 would be impossible to achieve in the face of these historical and regional trends.

⁹ See Colclough with Lewin (1993), Table 1.3, p. 214.

¹⁰ See Colclough, Al-Samarrai, Rose and Tembon (2003), Table 2.2.

Figure 1: Changes in gender disparities of gross enrolment ratios between 1990 and 2000 (countries with changes of 5 percentage points or more, in increasing order of GPI in 2000)



Source: UNESCO (2003, pp 54)

Thus, it was predictable that both the enrolment and the gender goals would not be achieved within the time frames chosen. Only those set for 2015 appeared to allow of sufficient time to be achievable, although even that would depend upon sustained national effort and international aid over the 15-year period. It could, of course, be argued that failure to achieve the first of the MDGs, which happened in 2005, would provide an incentive to marshal further support and try harder, and that, thus, there was deliberate over-optimism built into the goal-setting process. Yet such intentional subtlety seemed, in the event, denied by the nature of the discussions at the UN Special Assembly on the Millennium Goals, held in New York in September 2005. These scarcely alluded to the world's failure to achieve the gender target in that year – preferring, instead, to concentrate attention on the ways and means of reaching those set for 2015.

Notwithstanding these circumstances, differences in the wording of the Millennium and Dakar goals imply that the question of what is meant by equality is central to an assessment of whether or not it can be achieved (see Table 2 below). The third MDG commits signatories to

‘promote gender equality and empower women’. This undertaking, therefore, gives a generalised commitment to the promotion of equality – one that extends well beyond the framework of education. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the operational target by which this goal was to be achieved and monitored was to ‘eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education no later than 2015’ (UN, 2001). This target is often misleadingly taken as being synonymous with the gender goal itself, whereas it was, at the time, simply judged to be one of the clearest ways of monitoring the progress being made towards equality and women’s empowerment.¹¹

Table 2. Gender Goals Compared

<p>EFA Dakar Gender Goal</p> <p>Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieve gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls’ full and equal access to, and achievement in, basic education of good quality.</p> <p>Millennium Gender Goal</p> <p>Goal 3. Promote gender equality and empower women</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Target 4. Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education no later than 2015.</p> <p><i>Sources: UNESCO (2000a); UN (2000)</i></p>

The MDG target makes no mention of equality, but only of the need to achieve enrolment parity – i.e. equal numbers (or proportions) of boys and girls attending school, college or university. This notion of parity is a quantitative, static concept. However, since progress towards gender parity in enrolments suggests a weakening of the structures that privilege men in society, it can suggest progress towards achieving equality in a broader sense. Nevertheless, such progress may be made whilst, at the same time, enrolment declines for boys, girls or both, were recorded. This happened during the 1990s in Africa, where the impact of recession and

¹¹ This elision was evident even in the selection of Task Forces set up under the Millennium Project, and which reported on progress towards the goals during 2005. There were ten of these, but Task Force 3 was asked to report on both the education and the gender goals (Goals 2 and 3). Task Force members soon found it necessary to have two reports – one on education and one on gender equality – with education being recognised as fundamental for the latter, yet comprising only one of the gender report’s seven strategic priorities for policy change (UN Millennium Project, 2005, pp. 28-29).

adjustment brought a reduction of primary enrolments in many countries - more strongly so for boys than for girls¹². Here, then, an apparent move towards gender parity was secured in a highly undesirable way. Thus, account needs to be taken of the trajectory being made towards gender parity: it is not merely the quantitative balances themselves that are important but also the processes by which they are secured.

The wording of the Dakar goal moves us beyond gender parity to take on the more ambitious agenda of achieving gender equality in education by 2015. Although definitions vary, full equality would seem to require the achievement of equality of opportunities to participate in education, of equality in learning processes whilst at school, of equality of outcomes - such that learning achievements would not differ by gender - and, finally, of equality of external results - such that job-opportunities and earnings for men and women with similar qualifications would be equal. These are demanding conditions¹³, which imply that the gender parity indicator alone provides an inadequate proxy for the achievement of equality in education in this broader sense. Identifying the true nature of the global agenda is thus not straightforward. Even to achieve enrolment parity will require social and economic changes which go beyond the purview of Ministers of Education. Achieving full equality in education, as envisaged by Dakar, is much more ambitious.

The extent to which either of these goals can be achieved in poor states is dependent, usually, upon an approach to policy reform which is deeply rooted, and which embraces a sophisticated understanding of the causes of existing inequalities. In that context, since the early 1970s, there has been a bifurcation between descriptive, or developmentalist work on gender issues (often referred to as 'women in development' (WID) approaches), and more structural and analytic ('gender and development' (GAD)) approaches to understanding discrimination and female subordination. Writers in the former tradition were initially concerned to emphasise the crucial roles played by women in the traditional economy, and the costs to growth if, on being displaced by industrialisation, they were not re-absorbed into the wage economy. Women and men were characterised as having equal productive capacities, yet very unequal access to education and other resources. Social and market imperfections which created women's exclusion needed to be addressed. This 'efficiency' argument for the equal treatment of men and women lay at the heart of the WID case: if women were excluded from contributing to

¹² The evidence is given in Colclough *et. al.* (2003, pp. 29-30)

¹³ For discussion of these issues see UNESCO (2003), chapters 3 and 4.

development, potential output was lost, and there was a clear case for directing resources towards them¹⁴.

A major omission from many of these early writings was any serious attempt to analyse the position of women in society in relation to that of men. Treating women as the only focus for analysis was ultimately misleading. Feminist analysts began to argue that the constraints faced by women could not be understood without examining the nature, basis and reproduction of male power. As the centrality of relations between women and men became acknowledged in accounting for their unequal roles in development, the key category for analysis shifted from 'women' towards 'gender'¹⁵. With this shift towards a 'gender and development' (GAD) paradigm, came a view that departed radically from the WID tradition, that relations between the sexes are not necessarily non-conflictual – indeed that socially constructed gender relations may be characterised by opposition and conflict (Whitehead, 1979). It is not the physical and biological differences between men and women, so much as the socially differentiated aspects of gender which lead to the different ways in which women and men are constrained during their lives. Emphasis shifted towards analysing gender relations in the household, which were seen as being the main source of subsequent inequality. Gender roles which appear natural in most cultures have in fact emerged from long-standing past practice, which ascribes them with normative significance (Connell, 1987). Gender reforms in the wider society become constrained by this history, which gives men, and some women, a deeply personal stake in the maintenance of the status quo, and makes it unlikely that the state will be able to initiate significant social change (Stromquist, 1989, pp.171; Kabeer, 1994, pp. 36-7).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the language of international policy documentation has traditionally been informed mainly by the stance of WID analysts, who take a more liberal and optimistic view of the prospects for gender reform. State forces are seen by such writers to be at least tractable – if not benevolent. Advice, evidence and argument are judged capable of influencing governments to ensure women's rights to education and other social goods, and to the labour market and economic reforms that such outcomes require. Arguably the vocabularies of both the MDGs and of the Dakar Goals, are in this tradition. These goals urge the world to move towards equality in education by achieving parity of enrolments – implying however, that this can be simply done by moving available policy levers to bring outcomes that will have positive or neutral, rather than negative, effects for sections of important elite groups.

¹⁴ See, for example, Boserup (1970), Caplan (1981), Dey (1981)

¹⁵ Young et al (eds) (1981) provides an influential early example of this new tradition.

Nonetheless, some recent publications from international agencies have analysed prospects for their better attainment more subtly than the initial formulation of the goals seemed to imply. Unterhalter (2005, pp. 23-4) points out that the 2003/4 EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2003), which focuses upon the ways in which the gender and education goals may be achieved, is in the GAD rather than the WID tradition. It recognises the deeply embedded constraints both in education and, particularly, in society at large, which act to frustrate piecemeal attempts at reform. A similar stance is taken by the report on progress towards the gender goal from the MDG Task Force 3 (UN Millennium Project, 2005). There are, of course, contradictions, in that both of these documents also include (but do not limit themselves to) familiar policy agendas as ways forward. Although the need for profound social and economic change as a means to achieving gender equality is a recurring theme of their analyses, for pragmatic reasons many of their proposals need to entertain a more gradualist approach to reform. What is different in these recent international documents, however, is a clear recognition that action is needed across a wide array of sectors and interests, extending well beyond education itself, if the goal of gender equality in education is to be achieved.

4. Reducing Gaps between Targets and Action

Assuming that adequate policy change is indeed within reach, what can be done by the UN, or by the international community more broadly, to hold countries to their promises? It is obvious that, in matters of social and economic policy, if national governments choose to ignore the commitments that they have publicly espoused there is no easy sanction available to make them change their behaviour. As suggested earlier, adding the political commitments made in UN Declarations to the legal undertakings embedded in UN human rights treaties can be expected to increase the likelihood that governments will take their own pledges seriously. But it certainly does not ensure that that will be so, as the continued substantial inequalities between male and female school enrolments in more than ninety countries demonstrate¹⁶. However, there are two main ways in which the international community can bring pressure to bear: firstly, periodic reporting of progress towards the EFA goals at the national level provides some accountability of governments and international agencies for actions taken or missed. Secondly, negotiated partnership arrangements – notably between governments and international agencies via the international aid process – provide a means of leverage to secure ‘better’ education policies in exchange for the provision of financial and technical aid resources over the medium term.

¹⁶ The data are shown in UNESCO (2005, p. 72).

Although both of these pressure lines may, even in principle, have only limited power to influence action, there is an important question as to whether the established machinery is best suited to the tasks in hand. In that regard, UNESCO was assigned a central role by the World Education Forum. The organisation was mandated to take a leadership role in sustaining international support for EFA and to promote better global coordination of such efforts. Although it has had some success as regards informing the global debate and providing a key means of increasing the accountability of national and international EFA actors, it has been less clearly successful in leading and coordinating increased international support for EFA. This is partly because it is difficult for an agency which does not, itself, have access to significant resources, to influence the decisions of those who do have such access, and to mobilize new aid monies for EFA.

Two major developments attended UNESCO's enhanced role. First the Director General convened annually (from 2001) a small and flexible 'High Level Group' which would meet to discuss detailed progress towards EFA and to design strategies for its improvement. The Group comprises Ministers of Education or their representatives from some 10-15 countries, bilateral and multilateral development agencies (usually represented by the heads of their education division) and directors of a set of international and national NGOs which are active in education, or judged to be articulate in matters of educational aid and policy. The membership of the Group – particularly the countries represented - has changed somewhat from year to year. A communiqué is issued, based upon its deliberations, which is variously reported by the international press. It is intended that its content should influence national and international educational policy and that it would inform public opinion on matters of EFA.

The second development was the establishment of a new annual publication – an EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR) – which was intended to provide an independent and high quality assessment of the world's progress towards EFA, and which would directly inform the deliberations of the High Level Group. This publication has been produced annually since 2002 by a team which is based in UNESCO, but which remains independent of it in terms of its professional stance and editorial policy. The report has been well resourced by a group of bilateral agencies. It provides both a global statistical overview of education systems, in all their detail, and of aid to education, drawing upon the resources of the UNESCO Institute of Statistics in Montreal, and of the OECD DAC database in Paris. It also gives substantial analysis of key challenges for education and aid policies, informed by a large body of research commissioned and/or synthesised by the report team. Annual issues since 2002 have covered financing EFA,

gender equality, the quality of education, literacy, and early childhood care and education, respectively. The GMR has achieved wide international currency and influence. A recent evaluation of the first three reports, commissioned by the international community, finds it to be ‘a high quality, authoritative document that has become a flagship for UNESCO’ (Universalia 2006, p. 8). It has improved both the flow of information and the quality of analysis of the issues, so that the policy-making process at the international level is better-informed than before.

On the other hand, its influence upon opinion and policy has been neither linear nor uncontentious. As an example of this it is worth considering the impact of the Education for All Development Index (EDI), which was first published in the 2003/4 GMR, and has subsequently been updated annually¹⁷. This index aims to provide a summary statistic which indicates the progress which countries are making towards EFA, in such a way that they can be compared and ranked, one with another. Its constituents reflect four of the six Dakar goals, one indicator being included as a proxy measure for each of them¹⁸. Rather like the Human Development Index, which is not necessarily strongly correlated with the usual indicators of development success, the EDI reveals that some relatively well-off and successful countries (such as South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Guatemala) are in fact strongly lagging on EFA-progress measures, whereas some low-income countries (such as Cuba, China, Tajikistan) have very high EDI scores. These kinds of comparison serve to show that many of the countries with low levels of educational provision could – given greater political commitment – sharply improve their relative positions. In other words, much more could be done by these countries to live up to their agreed EFA commitments.

There is, almost always, a range of technical issues to overcome in the construction of an index. For example, in the case of the UNDP’s Human Development Index, there is a problem as to how to add together, or even compare the relative importance of, its selected constituents - life expectancy at birth, the adult literacy rate, the gross enrolment ratio, and GDP per capita - within the same index. Even where measurement problems do not impose incommensurability, there is a real question as to how the different elements in an index should be weighted. In that case, value judgements are inescapable which can strongly affect national index values and country

¹⁷ See UNESCO (2003, pp. 284-292) and subsequent volumes in the series.

¹⁸ The indicators for each of the goals are: the net enrolment ratio in primary education as an indicator of progress towards UPE; the literacy rate of those aged 15 years and over, as an indicator of adult literacy; the survival rate to grade 5 as an indicator of the quality of education; the simple average of gender parity indices for primary and secondary education and for adult literates, as an indicator of the gender goal. The other two ‘Dakar’ goals – for the enhancement of early childhood education and of life-skills programmes – do not yet have indicators which are conducive to quantitative measurement on an international basis.

rankings¹⁹. However, in the case of the EDI, the technical problems are relatively absent – all constituents of the index can be expressed in percentages and each of them provides a reasonably direct proxy measure for the relevant Dakar goal. Moreover, since the Dakar Framework document does not assign greater importance to the achievement of some goals rather than others, there is no obvious need to weight any of the constituents of the index with values other than unity. Thus the index is calculated as a simple average of the percentage values for each of the four indicators of progress towards EFA.

Notwithstanding its relatively uncomplicated design, the index at first proved controversial, mainly because it provided a transparent instrument for making simple comparisons and, sometimes, for delivering unpalatable messages. Representatives of some countries with low values for the EDI objected to its methods of calculation, and to the reliability of the data it utilised. They pointed to the time-lag of some two or three years between the collection of the data and their publication internationally, thereby implying that the reliability, or currency, of the messages they contained could be questioned. This aspect of securing accountability proved to be one of the more contentious aspects of the GMR's impact.

Since the gender goal was represented, in the index, by the average gender parity values for primary and secondary education and for adult literacy, broader measures of equality were thereby assumed to be correlated with the progress being made towards gender parity. As argued earlier, although there is a reasonable case for this (and, in any event, measurement problems militate against the use of more complex measures over the short term), a shift to gender equality would in fact require changes along a much broader front than mere enrolment indicators. Thus, although the simple enrolment comparisons implied by the use of the gender indices track only some of the easier aspects of progress towards gender equality, even these proved controversial. In the case of China, for example, increases in the private costs of attending primary schools had led, during the late 1990s, to enrolment declines for both girls and boys, particularly in the poorer rural counties. Reporting of these facts for the 2003/4 Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2003) initially led to extensive correspondence between members of the report team and Chinese colleagues, who argued that the data used must be erroneous and that the relevant conclusions could not properly be drawn.

¹⁹ See, for example, UNDP (2004, pp 258-264), where the methods, and associated technical problems of constructing the Human Development Index, and the other indices used by the Human Development Report, are outlined.

On the other hand, by the second and third years of its use, a number of countries had accepted the power of the index and were beginning to use it as a criterion for their own success: the new Indian administration, for example, announced at the High Level Group meeting in Brasilia in 2004 that they had adopted a target for India being substantially higher in the index ranking by 2010. Furthermore, the press in most countries seized on the index as an excellent means of producing attention-grabbing copy, and it allowed a straightforward way for lobbyists to call government ministers to account for their country's present position on EFA, and to commit themselves to improving it.

The claim that the data were too old (or inaccurate) to be dependable was not a tactic used only by those developing countries who were embarrassed by their position in the national rank order of EFA progress. It was also used by some of the international agencies who found themselves compared unfavourably with others who were allocating more substantial resources to securing EFA objectives (generally via support to basic education and primary schooling). Such agency representatives typically argued that their policies had changed and that data for the most recent year (rather than the preceding one) would show a better picture of their aid programme. The fact that the discussion topics at HLG were only rarely formally revisited the following year meant that the subject – and the particular nature of the protest - may escape re-inspection when the data had become available²⁰.

This circumstance reveals a more fundamental flaw with the current processes of international coordination of EFA. The machinery, such as it is, is mainly contingent. The High Level Group itself has no formal role and its outcome does not extend beyond a communiqué that has no formal status on the international stage. Although the communiqué is issued for publication, and it may achieve some coverage in the international press, its proposals for action do not get translated upwards either within the UN bureaucracy or in a parallel international political process. The impact of the communiqué is not monitored, nor yet formally revisited, in successive HLG meetings. Its messages disappear into the ether, and their longevity tends to be more affected by the quality of the Global Monitoring Report document, and by the extent of its distribution, than by the formal discussions of it at HLG itself.

²⁰ This is not necessarily to imply disingenuousness on the part of either government or agency representatives. Often, policies had indeed changed, and the data did reveal some improvement the following year. This was, however, rarely by so much as to change national or agency rankings in very significant ways.

5. Conclusion

The aim of achieving gender equality in education – and more broadly so in society – has become established, along with a small number of other discrete poverty-focussed policy objectives, at the very top of the international development agenda during the course of the last decade. Whilst it might be thought that a concern to promote greater equality should in any case be implied by any emphasis on poverty, the specific identification of gender equality as an important target for anti-poverty action was a new departure. Its inclusion implies that the impact of gender theory and evidence upon our understanding of the causes of poverty has now attained high-profile operational significance.

The international community has espoused the MDGs primarily because they define policy objectives in terms of outcomes and because they allow the performance of nations, and of agencies, to be assessed and compared. This paper has shown, however, that gender equality in education is not easy to monitor as an outcome of policy change. The main indicator adopted as an interim target – the achievement of gender parity in enrolments – risks being too reductionist. The obvious possibility of greater gender parity being promoted by enrolment declines for both boys and girls indicates that achieving static outcome targets is not always a good guide to policy success.

More generally, there has been a latent tension between some of the practical ‘can do’ presuppositions of the MDGs which were historically informed by gender theory in the WID tradition, and more fundamental structural reforms that would be implied by a GAD framework. Although there is recent evidence from UN documentation that these traditions can each generate complementary insights for policy, the radical feminist tradition is likely to point to their contradictions, and to remain pessimistic that present agendas will deliver equality.

However, the outcome indicators associated with the MDGs are increasingly used to assess comparative performance between nations, and, to a much lesser extent, between agencies. They therefore serve to provide some accountability for aid received, and for domestic commitment to shared goals. Their present weakness, however, is that the ‘northern’ side of the implicit contract is not being kept. Far from countries not being thwarted in their EFA aims by a lack of resources, sufficient aid has not yet been forthcoming, in many cases, even where such a demonstrated commitment has been made. The politics of the process are dependent upon this implicit contract being honoured. The challenge of ‘scaling up’ aid activities to a new, much higher level, is probably at the heart of whether the MDGs eventually make a major difference to the provision of education and to gender equality within it, over the coming decades.

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