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Accelerating SDGs: Exploring New
Pathways to the 2030 Agenda



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LEARNING FOR/TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: REIMAGINING EDUCATION AND LEARNING AS A KEY VERTICAL ACROSS THE SDGs

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Anitha Kurup, Professor and Head, Education Program, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru

Brigid Freeman, PhD, Academic Fellow, Australia India Institute, the University of Melbourne; Visiting Professor, National Institute of Education Planning and Administration, New Delhi

Cheshta Arora, PhD, Senior Researcher, Western Norway Research Institute, Norway


Debarun Sarkar, Researcher, Vidyashilp University/University of Mumbai/Independent Researcher

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Abstract



In many parts of the world, there is uncertainty about the diminishing quality of higher education systems. Concurrent crises have negatively impacted the well-charted policy trajectories in education (i.e., what is being taught), learning (i.e., what is being learned and how), and knowledge (i.e., what ought to be taught). Existing policy interventions primarily focus on formal spaces of learning, despite the growing recognition of informal learning, and long-standing commitments to lifelong learning. While school, vocational, and higher education are addressed under SDG4, the new realities of impending,

multiple emergencies demand a reimagination of what it means to learn in an unpredictable environment. There is a need to build robust equitable infrastructures that can sustain the global mobility of learners across sectors as well as pedagogic tools and processes to interrogate and share diverse sustainable approaches being practised across the G20 nations. This Policy Brief calls for sustained effort to expand spaces, tools and methods of learning and put forward a blueprint for *learning for/towards sustainable development* as a key policy directive across all SDGs.



The Challenge



1

Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold.

“We are more likely to achieve the transformations that sustainability processes and goals require if we have a disposition that embraces transience in everything.” – David Selby (2006)

To think of sustainability from the perspective of transience might sound paradoxical. After all, sustainability is frequently premised on notions of conservation, protection, stability, and predictability. For example, the most commonly cited definition of ‘sustainability’ relies on a trope of a well-enumerated balance sheet that can account for the needs of the present and prepare for the future—

“The ability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”¹

Such a definition, however, is inherently flawed for its stable-state view. The COVID-19 pandemic was a wake-up call as it created an unprecedented global crisis that caused significant disruption

to people’s lives and livelihoods.² The new normal requires actors “who can work across systems and sectors, both public and private, quickly and at scale in contexts of complexity and uncertainty.”³ Even in the post-pandemic era, it is indubitable that “we live in uncertain times” as is frequently reiterated by the United Nation’s Secretary-General⁴ and other affiliate actors⁵ highlighting an emerging “uncertainty complex”⁶ comprising of “everyday uncertainty that people have always faced, the pursuit of sweeping societal transformations, dangerous planetary change of the Anthropocene and widespread, intensifying polarisation.”⁷

These quotes attest to the depth of uncertainty that looms large over our systems, institutions and policy infrastructures,^a and illustrate how ongoing economic, environmental, and political crises have had a negative impact on our well-charted policy trajectories. In this context, the imperative is to formulate policies that can better capture the new realities and the future emergent therein.

a A policy Infrastructure refers to a multi-layer ecosystem that includes policy making, facilitation implementation, evaluation, enforcement, and management.

To (un)hold the un-holdable.


To think from a disposition of transience is to embrace movement, mobility, ephemerality, or elusiveness of things. Given the uncertain times, it is all the more necessary to work with an understanding that policies, systems, institutions, and infrastructures are transient, “response-able”, and malleable. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how vulnerable and ill-prepared the world’s formal learning spaces are. Given the concurrent and unpredictable economic, environmental, and political crises facing the global community, there is a need to better prepare for the new realities of impending, multiple concurrent emergencies.

The challenge facing us today, therefore, is twofold. First is to determine the ways by which education policies and metaphors of durability, certainty, and stability can move towards tropes of mobility, malleability, and ephemerality. The second is how school, vocational, and higher education systems, institutions, and policy infrastructures should be designed so they will pass the test of these uncertain, malleable, and ephemeral times.

Education as a key enabler of all other SDGs.

The importance of learning and education as a vertical that cuts across all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was recognised in 2017. The UN General Assembly Resolution 72/222 acknowledged ‘Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)’ as “an integral element of the Sustainable Development Goal on quality education and a key enabler of all the other Sustainable Development Goals”⁸ while using Resolution 74/233 in 2019 to call upon countries to enhance their ESD implementation.

ESD emerged against the backdrop of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. The 1992 *Agenda 21: Programme of Action for Sustainable Development* envisioned ESD as an intervention to propagate the notion of sustainable development. This focus on ESD extended previous interest in environmental education (EE) expressed in declarations such as the Tbilisi Declaration of 1977 and the International Environmental Education Programme (1975-1995). Both ESD and EE have been critiqued as being narrow in terms of their framing of the environment, excluding a wide range



of contemporary ecological outlooks⁹ and retaining a focus on raising environmental awareness and skills.

As it is well-known, the domain of 'education' is explicitly addressed in the SDG framework in SDG 4, 'Quality Education', and its various sub-points. However, the challenge of education far exceeds the scope of SDG 4. All SDGs in some form or another have a 'knowledge' component which cannot be addressed if learning has a narrow definition. That the UN General Assembly Resolution 72/222 tries to address this is welcome.

All SDGs aim to reorient human lives in some form. They aim to reconfigure how humans and non-humans interact, accommodate, and relate with human and non-human processes and entities. Such reconfigurations necessarily entail adapting to new realities, changing the way one lives, consumes, interacts, and works (i.e., makes sense of the world). This entails privileging certain forms of

knowledge while re-interrogating others. As such, there is a key component of re/learning that permeates all SDGs. By pointing out the challenge of locating the problematic of learning and knowledge in all SDGs, the aim is to draw attention to diverse ways in which formal and informal, continuous and lifelong learning can be made to interact while raising questions regarding the what, how, when and who of knowledge underpinning all SDGs. SDG4's narrow focus on quality education limits the possibility of addressing folk knowledge, indigenous knowledge, and informal networks of knowing and doing things that are central to both formal and informal sectors. These knowledge domains play a key role in the everyday lives of millions of people.

It is in this light of a malleable, uncertain future and the need for expanding learning spaces and practices that cut across all SDGs to help pass the test of uncertain times, this brief makes the following proposals.



The G20's Role

2





G20 brings within its ambit diverse economies which face distinct yet interconnected global challenges. This very diversity can enable G20 to experiment with innovative solutions to global governance that are exigent in today's crisis-ridden world. While the discourse on 'education for sustainability' has been emerging over the last decade in the wake of concurrent environmental crises, it still requires innovative policy solutions that can account for economic, cultural, social, linguistic, and political diversities. The discourse on education for sustainability needs to move away from 'one size fits all' strategies of formal learning spaces towards more context-specific solutions to education

and learning. While some economies have made greater progress than others, each needs to work together to ensure that everyone has access to sustainable solutions.

As the 2030 deadline nears, the SDG agenda requires strong global leadership to coordinate and drive the world's global economy and institutions towards innovative sustainable solutions. Considering that G20 represents some of the largest countries—economically, culturally, and politically—its leadership in radically thinking through education as a key vertical across all SDGs and implementing appropriate policies as recommended here will make an assured difference to the development agenda.



Recommendations to the G20

3



Proposal 1: Integrate education, learning, and knowledge as a critical vertical across all SDGs to prepare for uncertain times.


The UN General Assembly Resolution 72/222 in 2017 acknowledged the key role that education must play in achieving the SDGs and supported the introduction of ESD as an enabler. While referring to these uncertain times, the UN General Assembly Resolution alluded to the balancing act for which education must be recruited as a key vertical. However, ESD remains limited to raising “awareness of the 17 goals in education settings”, promoting “critical and contextual understanding of SDGs”, and achieving and mobilising “action for sustainable development in education settings” through a whole-institutions approach.¹⁰

While being a welcoming call, ESD remains largely instrumental—as a tool to raise awareness, improve understanding, or mobilise communities around other SDGs. Where ESD differs from SDG4 is in its role to “raise critical questions on the inter-linkages between and among different SDGs.”¹¹ However, even expanded as such, it remains formulated as a tool to balance different

and at times conflicting demands contained within the SDG framework that is strongly tied to the paradigm of economic growth.¹²

This brief takes a different approach and calls for the integration of education, learning, and knowledge as key components across all verticals. The emphasis is on moving away from learning *about* SDGs to learning built around transience with an acceptance of a dynamic, uncertain, unpredictable world that requires lifelong learning and response-ability in the face of an ephemeral, malleable world. The recommendations cover education policies, systems, institutions, and infrastructures that can sustain continuous, lifelong learning with resilience despite ever-shifting grounds. G20 countries should:

1. Integrate learning and knowledge as key components across all SDGs in a dynamic manner to encourage teaching and learning *for* sustainability as opposed to teaching/learning *about* SDGs.
2. Promote policies that broaden quality learning and interrogate how different modalities such as formal



and informal, continuous, and lifelong learning can be nurtured to enable sustainable living.

3. Increase research funding for projects that can build context-specific forward and backward linkages across all SDGs, interrogate the “sustainability-through-growth paradigm”,¹³ and formulate alternative definitions of ‘sustainability’.

Proposal 2: Recognise informal learning and knowledge as an indispensable feature of social reality.

A growing body of literature argues for explicitly linking SDGs with *learning outcomes*,¹⁴ more clearly establishing how formal education develops sustainability development-related knowledge, skills and competencies. While this thrust is supported, learning is not limited to formal school, vocational and higher education spaces. Moreover, alternative modes of learning and acquiring knowledge have been noted to contribute more strongly towards learning *for* sustainability—these are embedded in social relations and involve an “experiential, developmental

process that fully engages learners in the process of their own learning and asks participants to take responsibility for their success, future possibilities, and the survivability of human society and culture.”^{15,16} Moreover, recognising skills acquired in informal spaces can promote human dignity and respect which directly contributes to building sustainable societies.

SDG-related learning occurs formally and informally—in the workplace, in communities and libraries, through engaging with indigenous knowledge, and among peers. Learning also occurs through coaching, language programs, and apprenticeships. In some economies, the education policies and regimes that formally recognise such learning, and institutional structures and processes that assess such learning, remain limited.¹⁷

Furthermore, technologies deployed in some education systems and institutions to recognise, monitor and certify performance and attainment in informal learning spaces remain limited, particularly where parity of esteem differentials between formal and informal learning persist. This is particularly important for the growing

number of children, youth, and mature-age persons outside formal school, vocational, and higher education systems. G20 countries should:

1. Encourage systems, institutions, industry, and communities to explore how informal learning spaces can be nurtured, and receive recognition for, the development of sustainability-related knowledge, skills, and competencies.
2. Encourage the expansion of technologies to recognise and certify performance and attainment of skills in informal spaces, including both marketable as well as SDG-related skills and competencies.


Proposal 3: Effortless movement across ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ spaces of learning

In 2020, World Economic Forum (WEF) director Saadia Zahidi announced that “the world is facing a reskilling emergency”¹⁸ to meet the demands of the fourth industrial revolution. According to WEF’s estimates, over half of all employees will require significant reskilling or upskilling to meet the

demands of rapidly evolving job markets. Similar concerns have been pointed out by the OECD’s *Education at a Glance 2020*¹⁹ report, which highlighted the need for education to be more responsive to the changing needs of industry.

The question of reskilling, however, is often tied to economic growth and individual livelihoods, which emphasise marketable skills. While marketable skills prepare them for a supposedly predictable future, sustainable skills that focus on *learning to learn* are needed to equip learners facing an increasingly transient and crisis-ridden world.

Despite global recognition of the challenge of reskilling, entry and exit points between formal or informal spaces of learning remain underdeveloped in some economies, and in others are not sufficiently seamless. Furthermore, recognition of different modes of learning (e.g., face-to-face, blended, online) remains problematic in many economies, notwithstanding advances made during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, transitions between and within different education sectors (i.e., school, vocational, and higher education) also remain problematic.



Each of these—seamless entry and exit points; recognition of different modes of learning; and transitions between/within different sectors—are important for learners as they navigate economic and social demands and can negatively impact learning for sustainability efforts. G20 countries should:

1. Encourage systems and institutions to incorporate sustainable skills, knowledge, and competencies in their reskilling and upskilling programs. This is relevant across all SDGs.
2. Where required, encourage systems and institutions to promote seamless pathways between formal and informal spaces of learning.
3. Where required, encourage education systems and institutions to recognise and deploy different modes of learning (e.g., face-to-face, blended, online).
4. Encourage decentralised ethos in formal spaces of learning to bridge the gap between formal and informal modes of learning and enable equitable exchange.

Proposal 4: Knowledge sharing across currently ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ domains

According to a 2016 UNESCO report, “40% of the global population does not access education in a language they understand.”²⁰ To better integrate different learning spaces, modes and individuals as part of the learning for sustainability paradigm, there is a need to embrace language diversity and indigenous modes of knowing and doing. This is a central requirement to ensure the equal valuation of different modes of learning and knowing, and to develop sustainable skills that value planetary and social relationships. G20 countries should:

1. Consider the role that language diversity plays in expanding education for sustainability.
2. Ensure equitable access to and recognition of written and oral cultures of learning and knowledge-making.
3. Use technology to re-envision approaches to peer review, facilitate equal access to open-access publishing, and offer adequate

incentives to popularise and translate new research into different contexts and languages.

4. Find innovative ways to document, represent, and archive knowledge in under-resourced languages and cultures, and encourage community-based development and ownership of such archives and knowledge systems.


Proposal 5: International mobility routes for learners from both formal and informal sectors

It is widely accepted that while migration and (im)mobility shape people's lives, identity, and status in complex ways,²¹ its influence remains hidden in the education-development nexus. Scholars have identified a "migration-sustainability paradox"²² wherein "migration plays a role as a driver of unsustainability as part of economic globalization, yet simultaneously represents a transformative phenomenon and potential force for sustainable development"²³ that helps improve well-being and reduce inequality and environmental burden. However, to reap these benefits and avoid harm, the imperative is to build robust frameworks

that can nurture these education-migration-sustainability linkages.

While international mobility routes for learners and workers from formal routes continue to go through regularisation (see longstanding UNESCO qualifications recognition conventions, and more recently, the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education), there would be benefits in opening up opportunities for informal learners. G20 should:


1. Introduce international mobility schemes and exchange programs for learners from informal sectors to enable equitable and unmediated exchange between formal and informal spaces, and mainstream and marginalised knowledge practices.
2. Encourage funding organisations to incorporate evidence of applicants' life and work experiences (including recognition of prior learning outcomes), to capture applicants' achievements gained through formal and informal learning routes.



Attribution: Anitha Kurup et al., “Learning For/Towards Sustainable Development: Reimagining Education and Learning as a Key Vertical Across the SDGs,” *T20 Policy Brief*, July 2023.

Endnotes

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