

Education in Bhutan : Quality and Sustainability

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a set of global aspirations to transform the world by 2030. It consists of 17 goals and 169 targets. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) aims to “*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*”. As a signatory committed to achieve the SDGs by 2030, what does this mean for Bhutan? In this article, I look at the status of Education in Bhutan in relation to SDG4 targets, and discuss Bhutan’s education plans and practices and their alignment with SDG4 targets and indicators.

SDG4 and Bhutan

SDG4 consists of 10 targets and 11 indicators that include: completion rates of early childhood, primary, and secondary education; achievement of technical, vocational, and ICT skills; youth and adult literacy; knowledge and skills for sustainable development; provision of quality, inclusive facilities, learning environment, and teachers. However, this paper will discuss only targets and indicators I view to be important and relevant in Bhutan’s current context.

School Completion and Achievement

One of the SDG4 targets is to ensure children and young people complete secondary school with a minimum level of proficiency in reading and mathematics. Bhutan’s completion rate for primary school is 105 percent, and for secondary/ basic education is nine percent (Ministry of Education/MoE, 2016). Completion rates have seen a steady improvement over the years although it is apparent that not all children complete grades at the right age. Nevertheless, it is estimated that about 1,200 primary school age children (1.4 percent) are out of school or not enrolled in any form of structured learning. These are likely to be mainly dropouts, children with disabilities, living in remote areas, nomadic communities and migrant populations. While 100 percent completion rates at secondary school level are well within reach, ensuring that these disadvantaged groups are not left out will require concerted efforts and substantial investment.

Evidence available on achievement of proficiency levels in reading and mathematics suggest that it requires serious attention. In the 2013 National Education Assessment, only a little over 19 percent and four percent of class 10 students achieved proficiency level (defined as scoring more than 55 percent) in English and Mathematics respectively. Similarly, the proportion of students scoring more than 55 percent in the Bhutan Certificate of Secondary Education exams in 2014 stood at six percent in English, and 3.65 percent in Math. The Assessment of Student Learning for grades 4, 6, and 8 in 2008, 2010, and 2011 consistently showed poor and declining average scores in English, Math, and Science (Royal Education Council & Education Initiatives, 2011).

Quality Early Childhood Care and Development

One of the SDG4 targets is to ensure all children under 5 are developmentally on track, and have participated in at least one year of organised learning before entering primary school. This goal is supported by robust research findings that suggest long-term personal as well as social benefits of proper care and stimulation in early childhood. Early childhood is a period when most of the vital brain connections that shape the foundation for later development are formed (Shonkoff, 2015). Quality Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) leads to improved learning outcomes, reduced drop-out and repetitions rates, improved health, higher productivity, increased workforce participation, lower crime rates, and reduced dependence on welfare services (World Bank, 2011).

Currently, only 18.6 percent of 3-5 year-olds in Bhutan have access to organised learning environments in the form of ECCD or daycare centres. The current rate of increase in access is roughly two percent a year, but it will take at least a five-seven percent increase rate to reach the Education Blueprint access target of 50 percent of 3-5 year-olds by 2024. Besides accelerating access, a close watch on quality is necessary as damages done can be irreversible.

Quality Technical, Vocational and Tertiary Education

An important target under Goal 4 is to ensure education and training opportunities for all to equip them with appropriate knowledge and skills for employment. Bhutan's current unemployment rate is 2.5 percent, but its youth unemployment rate is 10.7 percent (National Statistics Bureau, 2016). According to the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources (MoLHR, 2015), the major cause of unemployment

in the country is due to mismatch in the supply and demand of labour. The labour market requires workers with diverse and specialised skills to cater to the increasing prominence of the private sector needs in service, information technology and construction industries. However, supply is dominated by business studies and general arts degree holders, who make up over 71 percent of the graduates in 2015. Other countries have addressed such a disparity in demand and supply through a diversified curriculum that allows students more options, often in anticipation of labour market trends and demands. Bhutan will need to change public mindsets as well as policies around values and incentives attached to different kinds of jobs. Educating students to choose the right career path that suits both their traits and interest, as well as labour market needs can play an important role.

As of today, there are six Technical Training Institutes and two Institutes of Zorig Chusum (13 traditional arts and crafts) in the country. In 2016, only 6.9 percent of students who completed class 10 went to these institutes. The Education Blueprint has set a goal of at least 20 percent of class 10 graduates enrolling in technical and vocational institutes by 2024. In the 12th Five-Year Plan (FYP) guideline, technical and vocational education has also been highlighted as a national key result area with two indicators directly linked to its quality (accreditation and employability). Yet, the risk is that unless there is an expansion in access to attractive new job options, the challenge of presently unemployed candidates acquiring and staying in long-term jobs will remain unaddressed. It is unlikely that there will be sustainable changes to the unemployment situation if the 12th FYP targets of providing globally or regionally accredited courses and the goal of graduates gaining employment within six months after graduation is achieved.

Equity and Eliminating Gender Disparities

SDG4 aims to reduce persistent disparities in education, and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities.

Despite good progress in the past few years, girls and women in Bhutan continue to be disadvantaged compared to males, thereby, missing out on most of their potential contribution to society.

Bhutan's adult literacy rate stands at 55.3 percent: female literacy rate is 45.2 percent against 66 percent for male (MoE, 2016). The unemployment rate for women is higher at 3.1 percent compared to 1.8 percent for men, a trend that is also true for

youth unemployment with 12.7 percent for females compared to 8.2 percent for males. Bhutan is ranked 121 out of 144 countries in gender parity, and performs poorly on women's participation and political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2016). Only 16 percent of Bhutan's legislators, senior official, and managers and 33 percent of professional and technical workers are females respectively; and women represent only 9 percent of the parliament. Yet, Bhutan has achieved gender parity up to high school education, and the survival rate for girls up to basic education is better than for boys. However, girls represent only about 37 percent of those in tertiary education (MoE, 2016). There is a need to understand the factors underlying poor transition to tertiary education, and develop a strategy to increase girls' participation in tertiary education.

According to one study (NSB, 2011), it is estimated that about one in every five children between the ages of two–nine years have some form of disability. This study showed clear associations between prevalence of disability and mothers' education level and socio-economic status. Prevalence was lower where mothers had at least a primary education, and being wealthier reduced the likelihood of disability in children. These clearly raise concerns related to equity, and the need to pay more attention to those made vulnerable by poverty, and also therefore, lack access to education.

Currently, there are 10 schools that cater to children with Special Education Needs (SEN), two institutes (one each for visually impaired and hearing impaired), and two vocational centres run by Draktsho (a Civil Society Organisation). Their total strength in 2016 was 611 students, only a small fraction of the children with disabilities. The Education Blueprint estimated 5,110 children between the ages of 6 and 16 years with some form of disability in 2014. Enlisting civil society support by providing funding, at least an equivalent to the cost of a student in a SEN school, may be one way of expediting outreach to children with disabilities.

Education for Sustainable Development

A key target under SDG4 is to “ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development”. This will require national education policies, curricula, and assessment to be tied to less mainstream subjects such as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), global citizenship education and human rights. Education for Sustainable Development is very important because we know that improvement in Education as it exists will not necessarily lead to a sustainable society. For example, developed countries with high rates of education

such as the United States also have the highest rate of per capita consumption, and leave the deepest ecological footprint.

Education is the key instrument that societies use to shape knowledge, ideas, values, and behaviours. Thus, for sustainable development to be a reality, it will require orienting our education system towards this goal. Incorporating sustainability education at all levels of education from early childhood education to tertiary and teacher education holds the greatest promise to ensuring sustainable societies. Yet the challenge is to transform education's role from one that too often reinforces unsustainable consumer behaviours to one that helps to cultivate the knowledge essential to living sustainable lives.

Sustainable Development is understood as addressing three inter-connected areas of sustainable economic prosperity, healthy ecosystem, and social equity. Social, economic, and political factors are often at the root of issues of ecosystem health. For example, economic gains are a major cause of environmental exploitation, as are marginalisation of certain groups to the benefit of others. ESD ensures that in building the human capital for economic prosperity, we do not lose sight of education for human values and care for nature.

The Education for Gross National Happiness initiatives that started in 2010 has set Education in Bhutan along this trajectory, but its implementation status in schools and impact are yet to be clearly understood. Subjects such as global citizenship education, human rights, consumer education, ecological literacy, and media literacy are yet to be part of mainstream curricula and assessment.

Sustainability and Bhutan's Education Plans and Practices

As we prepare ourselves to meet the SDG, it becomes important to ask ourselves how consistent our plans and practices are with the ideals of sustainable development. In this section, I discuss some topics of concern for Education in Bhutan in relation to their sustainability and sustainable development. This is followed by a brief discussion of how quality education is conceptualised in SDG4, the Education Blueprint, and the 12th FYP Guidelines; and their alignment to each other.

Sustainability and Central Schools

A good question to ask is how effectively or sustainably are resources allocated to Education used. This is a pertinent question especially because Bhutan continues to

be substantially dependent on external grants to fund its development plan. Budget allocation for the Education sector in successive FYPs have been relatively generous compared to most other countries especially in the region. However, how well it is spent is a more important question than how much has been spent.

One of the concerns raised regarding sustainability in recent times is the establishment of Central Schools as part of the Government's reform agenda to improve quality of education. According to a recent Press Release, so far, 51 central schools have been established, and the Government intends to establish 60 central schools within 11th FYP, and eventually achieve a total of 120 Central Schools by the end of 12th FYP. Central Schools provide free stationery, uniform, sports gear, bedding, board, and meals. In their recent review report, the National Council's Special Committee for Education (2016) observed an additional annual per student cost of Nu 19,370 for boarders and Nu 7,546 for day-scholars over and above what is spent on students in non-central schools. The Committee raises concerns of sustainability given the likelihood of a drastically increased burden of recurring costs once all 120 Central Schools have been established. Others have also raised similar concerns of sustainability of the central school approach of free handouts, and argue that it works to reverse any progress made towards the national policy of self-reliance (Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa, 2016).

A deleterious effect of meeting such recurring costs is likely to diminish funding for other areas of importance to quality such as teacher professional development, curriculum improvement, and learning resources. The Special Committee's review of budget allocation shows that these essential areas received only a small fraction of the budget allocation. In the financial year 2015-2016, teacher professional development was allocated 2.39 percent, curriculum reform- 0.26 percent, and learning resources- 1.82 percent of the total allocation.

While the intention is to improve cost-effectiveness based on economy of scale, it is doubtful if this will hold when the cost of free handouts are taken into account. Providing free handouts, irrespective of whether students and their families have a need also takes away the opportunity for parents to make a contribution to Education even when they can afford it.

An important but less talked about effect of the central school could be a diminished socio-cultural investment by parents as young children will be put in boarding schools, effectively making them miss out on the important social, emotional, and cultural learning that only homes and communities are best placed to transmit. This

is not to say that schools do not impart any of these values, but there are many tangible and intangible things in our culture that schools just cannot adequately address. For example, parental love and care, mother tongue, and many community-specific traditions which are at risk of being lost.

Despite the good intent, adopting a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach in the establishment of central schools will likely highlight other issues of quality and sustainability. A need-based approach may be in order - not all places require a central school, and not every student requires free handouts.

Ecological Sustainability

Thanks to Educating for GNH and the Green School initiatives, there exists a strong sense of care for the environment in our schools. Nonetheless, with growing economic prosperity and a consumerist culture come threats to ecology; the rising problem of non-biodegradable waste being one such example. The mass cleaning campaigns we do are good for creating some public awareness but they can hardly match the ever-present ads on mass media continuously urging us to consume and produce more waste. Alongside creating a clean and green environment, the seeds of sustainable habits must be planted in schools through ecological literacy and mindful consumption

Social Justice

Education must be seen as a medium for social change, a tool to help recognise and act upon societal inequities.

Despite the great progress Bhutan has made in Education within a very short period of time, we have barely touched the surface when it comes to reaching out to children with disabilities; gender disparity persists in areas where it matters the most (such as governance, and higher education); the rural and socio-economically disadvantaged young continue to be the most likely to be left behind. These suggest that there are gaps in the ways in which we think about equity. For example, the Special Committee on Education (2016) point to disparities in funding amongst schools in different locations and regions. The per student budget share of an urban school in Paro was found to be nearly five times higher than that of a similar school in remote Samdrup Jongkhar.

Our school system today is designed to cater to the needs of students who are so-

called “normal” and academically-inclined. We have very little place and provisions for the “differently-abled” or those with Special Education Needs, albeit with special gifts that can be harnessed to contribute to society. Excellence has become synonymous with performance in high-stake tests, and there is little incentive for inclinations towards applied learning, arts, sports and the like.

If Education reform in the past eight years is any indication of a move to sustainability, we have seen a variety of initiatives: some as radically divergent as the Extended Classrooms to take education to children, to Central Schools that bring all children to one central location; and Education City based on business models to Education for GNH emphasising human values. More recently, we hear a lot about school autonomy, and use of Kagan structures for collaborative learning labelled as transformative pedagogy for the twenty-first century. These are all based on genuine intentions to change, but also speak about sustainability of initiatives. One of the awaited “game-changing initiatives” in the Education Blueprint is the introduction of an Education Act. This may well be an opportunity to ensure the fundamental non-negotiables of what should entail a Bhutanese Education.

Quality Education in the SDG and National Goals and Plans

An important question to ask is whether SDG4 targets will ensure quality education that brings about sustainable development? In reality, many of the targets and indicators are an extension of the Millennium Development Goals targets such as access, participation rates, and gender parity. Quality refers mainly to proficiency levels in literacy and numeracy at different levels. The only clear departures are target 4.7 which is “ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development”, and perhaps target 4.2 on Early Childhood Care and Development.

In the 12th FYP, “quality of education and skills improved” is a National Key Result Area, and it outlines 10 indicators. These make specific references to quality as student performance levels in examinations, accreditation of institutions by regional and international bodies, employment of graduates, and achievement of sufficiency levels in (GNH survey) values and knowledge indices. It is unclear at this point, how these indicators will translate into key result areas at agency and local levels to address areas of interest towards meeting SDG4 targets and indicators. Given that the 12th FYP cover the critical early years of providing the important impetus to achieving the SDG targets, it becomes important to draw clear links between the two. On the other hand, the Education Blueprint aligns quite well with the SDG4

targets, but it will be interesting, and perhaps even challenging in my view, to map the Education Blueprint's four focus areas—namely, access, quality, equity, and system efficiency consisting of eight shifts and 40 game-changing initiatives - with 12th FYP indicators, even though many of them are slated to happen in the 12th FYP.

The 12th FYP indicators on quality of education lays a strong emphasis on accreditation, high-stakes testing, and employment, implying a neo-liberal approach to education as a means of accumulating human capital to boost economic growth, productivity, and technological skills for the labour market. However, it says very little about education's role in addressing social inequities, and education as a process of building knowledge, skills, and attitudes for sustainable development.

Building on the success of achieving MDGs, Bhutan will likely meet most indicators of access and participation rates as long as it addresses concerns of equity and outreach to those who are disadvantaged. 'Quality Education' is the label used for SDG4, yet quality can be evasive when measurable indicators are set. Thus, even as it is geared towards economic development, Quality Education that contributes to sustainable development, must address social inequities and environmental sustainability.