

THE RIGHT TO LEARN

Community participation in improving learning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education for All (EFA) goals have been the catalyst for progress in ensuring access to education. Since governments first endorsed these goals in 2000, around 45 million children who previously did not have access to education have enrolled in primary school and gender parity in primary education has improved significantly. With 2015 deadlines fast approaching, the world must now assess the considerable work that remains to be done and negotiate an ambitious yet achievable successor framework.

It is now widely recognized that we are facing a global crisis in learning. 250 million children – or a staggering 40 percent of the world's primary school age children – are unable to read, write, or demonstrate basic numeracy by fourth grade. It is the poorest, most marginalized children, including those living in areas affected by conflict, who are most at risk of being out of school or being in school but learning very little.

As we draw closer to the MDGs deadline, there is growing consensus amongst UN-led thematic, country and global consultations that the focus must move from enrolment to learning. Today, the conversation is not just about whether a child gets a seat in the classroom, it's about what they learn when they get there – as well as before they arrive and after they leave. For that reason, an equitable learning agenda must be central to the post-2015 development framework. This should extend beyond a narrow focus on inputs, such as the need for books and teacher training, to include processes for stimulating learning, measuring learning outcomes, and bolstering accountability to local stakeholders.

The failure by too many schools to provide good quality education and learning outcomes for all children is not just an issue for meeting rooms and international conferences. It is an issue affecting the lives of millions of children and parents around the world each day. And it is an issue on which they have something to say.

If an equitable learning goal is to be attained globally, the framework must be supported by stronger accountability to children, caregivers, and communities. These stakeholders – including innovative civil society organizations with deep roots in local communities which we hear from in this report – are uniquely positioned to hold education providers to account and to bring about lasting change. Ensuring processes of accountability to families and communities will be critical to upholding the right to learn for every child. This must be central to the post-2015 framework.

Parents and communities play a key role in holding schools to account for learning, both directly through direct accountability relationships and through feedback to district and national level duty-bearers. Harnessing the potential power of such relationships involves:

- Fostering the engagement and participation of ordinary citizens, including the most marginalized;
- Reaching agreement on minimum standards for learning outcomes and school-level inputs;
- Collecting and communicating local data to genuinely inform and empower;
- Empowering communities to create their own solutions to local issues and acknowledge their roles in improving learning;
- Linking local accountability to national system reform.

Recommendations

It is Save the Children's hope that by hearing from parents, communities and civil society organizations themselves, international and national action on education in a post-2015 framework will both respond to and channel local voices to shape and fulfill global commitments. To that end, we provide the following recommendations for UN institutions and member states as they negotiate a post-2015 framework on education:

1. UN Member States should advance an ambitious equitable learning goal in the post-2015 agenda that provides a framework for national level targets and minimum standards for learning against which governments and education providers can be held to account. This global goal should include:

- Learning targets aimed at “getting to zero” (i.e. eradicating) and “narrowing the gap” (e.g. reducing wealth, gender gaps) to ensure that every child, regardless of circumstance, is able to complete primary education with reading, writing, and numeracy skills that are in line with nationally defined minimum learning standards.
- Disaggregation of all targets and indicators by age, gender, ethnicity, disability, geography, and income and tracking progress in learning across all groups. Further, targets should only be considered met when they've been achieved across all socio-economic groups.
- A commitment to targeted action, including funding, to reach the most marginalized children. This will include the development of out-of-school policies that improve the home learning environment and provide opportunities to learn in the community.

2. As the Open Working Group begins drafting a post-2015 goal framework and intergovernmental negotiations progress, UN Member States should ensure citizen voices from the Global South – especially civil society – inform the process by:

- Prioritizing, convening, and funding national level consultations that target input from parents and communities, particularly those representing the most marginalized children.

- Supporting the development and dissemination of information on the post-2015 process in formats and languages that are accessible for marginalized groups.

3. Member States should ensure that any post-2015 framework is accompanied by a stand-alone goal to advance open, accountable and inclusive governance, including:

- A formal global accountability and reporting mechanism and complementary national level mechanisms, which provide channels for accountability to poor and vulnerable people.
- The preservation of legal and political space for the free and independent operation of civil society, including a mechanism to support and facilitate civil society's ability to monitor indicators and targets, keeping progress on track.

4. UN Member States should ensure that a post-2015 learning goal is accompanied by strengthened national and local accountability frameworks through which education provision and learning outcomes can be monitored by parents and communities, by:

- Taking steps to improve institutional frameworks for accountability to ensure parents and communities can hold schools and governments to account, such as through joining the Open Government Partnership (OGP), an international platform for domestic reformers set up in 2011 to ensure their governments are more accountable, open, and responsive to citizens. Participating countries should include improving local accountability in education in their OGP National Action Plans.
- Supporting better collection and disaggregation of data on learning to foster parent, teacher, and citizen engagement at global, national, and local levels. This should include support for existing initiatives, such as those highlighted in this report.
- Working with all stakeholders to reach agreement on contextually appropriate minimum standards for schools and learning, against which they can be held to account. This should be complemented with strategies to foster supportive out-of-school mechanisms for learning.

