

Education, SDGs and development strategies

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The SDGs

They are a large, holistic and long-term set of goals. They are a universal agenda, requiring progress at home and elsewhere. They require a whole-of-government endeavour and a whole-of-society endeavour. In Austria there is still little knowledge of them and so far no serious concern can be observed.

SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The agreement is positive, but little is new. The bias behind is a drive for measuring educational outcomes and further standardisation. However, it offers a momentum.

In Austria the aim meets with a system of exclusion. There is still no comprehensive secondary school system and the quality of education is measured by PISA indicators.

For the topic of the evening most relevant is target SDG 4.7.

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

– A critical look

1. Future knowledge or knowing the future?

There is the underlying assumption that there exists a fixed set of knowledge and skills we must acquire to reach a sustainable future. Yet, do we know what the world will be like in 2030? The target ignores the contingency we are faced with.

The future is unwritten:

Where is the world economic system, the world finance system moving to?

What will be the concrete effects of climate change in the coming decades?

Where will the gap between rich and poor lead to, locally, regionally, globally?

2. Preaching or Learning?

It would be much more important to follow a less prescriptive approach, but a more educational one: to learn how to learn; to question the unbroken belief in the almightiness of the “banking concept” (I. Illich) and the linear transfer of information. Learning to be understood as self-organised.

More than of skills, the acquisition of competencies is needed. In our societies, it is most important: to be able to critically reflect your own behaviour, individually and as a society, and thus be able to change it.

3. Creating performers or performing creativity?

SDG 4 has a bias towards the view of education as being a means to productivity as it focusses on creating skilled workers more than autonomous persons

SDG 4.3. and 4.4. talk of access to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education and of the relevant skills including technical and vocational skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. How this could work in the light of 25 mio young Africans entering the job market every (!) year, remains unanswered.

Learning is defined as *in order to*. The concept behind is that people should be adapted to changes and developments resulting from rapidly changing conditions on the market and a technological innovation that serves rationalisation. The neoliberal trends in education want people who are ready to be used.

I call this a technology of performativity instead of a culture of critical analysis and a culture of experiments and even failures.

4. Linear development or diversity in change?

The content is a vague vision of 2030, which can be reached if we acquire the right knowledge and skills. It ignores that only through a radical shift of parameters this vision can be reached in 14 years from now. Only a transformative education, which truly empowers learners, could contribute to it.

The theory of change seems to be: we want others to learn what will lead to immediate results. It ignores that awareness only grows slowly and that there is one constant, that is constant change.

5. Power to the rich or empowering the poor?

We have to see that more and more learners (also in the global north) are excluded from the gains of what we call development, the gains of globalisation; are marginalised, are NOT global citizens. For them the question is less how their lifestyles can become more sustainable, but how to afford any lifestyle at all.

SDG 4.5. defines marginalisation as being disabled, being indigenous, being a child in a vulnerable situation. It's the traditional approach saying for whom we have to be especially caring. It excludes the growing mass of people deprived of their economic and social rights (and therefore tend to follow nationalistic, racist, authoritarian directions and elites).

SDG 4.7. does not mention the issues of social and economic justice. It does not mention the need for a change in the power relations as a core content issue in education, if we really want to make education into a change agent for a sustainable world.

Conclusions and strategic suggestions:

In SDG 4 there is no critical approach to the term "development"; it is disguised by the word "sustainable". The concept seems to remain the same: development is about economic growth. Yes, some need growth, but others need de-growth.

There is a need to move strategies from a development agenda to an educational agenda. To put development co-operation into a perspective and go far beyond it.

There is no explicit understanding of education as transformative education. Such an education would see learning as a process (aiming at a change of perspectives, at an emancipation and empowerment which cannot be prescribed). There is a need for support for independent research and for innovation in the field.

There is no reference to power relations and their reality. Education is more and more commodified. The rich pay for their own (private) system; the poor fall out of the (public) system before they even enter it. A "new deal" for a policy of coherence is needed based on dialogue and cross-sectoral partnership.

A rights-based perspective is what is needed most: everybody's right to learn, to understand, to act.