The Twists and Turns in Negotiating a Global Education Goal: A Civil Society Perspective

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1 Introduction¹

The crafting of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been described as the world's most inclusive political process, with the voices of millions of people across the globe being heard, in contrast with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were agreed to behind closed doors. The SDGs have been praised for their ambition and courage in embracing the interlinkages of social, environmental, and economic issues (Bhattacharya & Kharas, 2015; Clarke, 2015). Conversely, they have been criticised and ridiculed for lacking clear priorities and measurable targets, and for simply being impossibly ambitious (Easterly, 2015; Hickel, 2015).

The SDGs also introduce a new set of priorities in education. Given the narrow scope of the MDGs, many working directly on advancing education were sceptical of any follow-up framework being able to respond sufficiently to their needs. The failure to reach the MDGs and the Education for All (EFA) goals, in combination with strapped public budgets, stagnating aid to education, and the limited appetite of governments for binding international agreements, had left many questioning the efficacy of another global framework (King, 2013a). At the same time, there was a great desire to get it right this time, and recommendations stemming from the MDG and EFA era provided both some initial direction and a sense of urgency (UNESCO, 2014f).

This chapter examines the making of the global education goal within the broader process of United Nations (UN) member states discussing and eventually agreeing on the 17 SDGs; it explores how education was seen and understood; what the areas of consensus, contention, and controversy were; and what happened when nonspecialists debated and decided the priorities in education. I argue that understanding these dynamics is key for strategically engaging with the SDGs and their implementation. Since the adoption of the SDGs, many attempts have been made to reinterpret and misrepresent the education goal's priorities. This chapter aims to challenge such reinterpretations by documenting the process.

The chapter does not aspire to be an objective overview of the process but rather an insider account of how the education agenda was crafted. It is based on my experiences as an education advocate, working to secure a stand-alone goal on free quality education on behalf of Education International (EI), the global federation of teacher unions. EI's engagement was fuelled by frustrations over the failure to meet earlier sets of goals, which the organisation felt reflected a lack of political will and adequate public financing, but also the failure to systematically involve teachers and their organisations. EI was determined to ensure that teachers had a voice this time around, and this became more important as the disagreements over the definition of quality were unfolding within the education sector's post-EFA process. EI profiled itself as a proponent of public education and of a broad notion of quality, encompassing quality tools and environments, as well as qualified teachers with decent terms and conditions of employment, and considered its participation vital for defending that position.

2 Getting the Process Started: The Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals

Numerous processes were launched in 2012 to shape the new development agenda, such as The World We Want survey (UN, 2012a) and the UN Secretary General's High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (UN, 2012b). Concurrently, the Government of Colombia succeeded in its advocacy for Sustainable Development Goals. The outcome document of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) Summit not only called for a set of goals but also launched the process for their design – the establishment of an *Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals* (OWG) with 30 members (UNGA, 2012).

The huge interest from member states – itself an indication of the OWG's importance – led to a compromise allowing countries within a regional group to share seats. Unlikely alliances (or 'troikas') were forming, such as Iran, Japan, and Nepal, or Bangladesh, the Republic of Korea, and Saudi Arabia, as 70 countries grouped together to fill the 30 seats.² This arrangement allowed countries to go beyond red lines put down by their regional blocs, the usual country coalitions for UN negotiations, and opened up the path for a different kind of consensus-building. These troikas made their own statements, often containing more specific suggestions than those of the regional blocs.

The OWG started its work by exploring the different elements of sustainable development through eight thematic sessions, allowing members to freely exchange views on progress made and the challenges ahead. These sessions

were supported by *Issues briefs* produced by a Technical Support Team (TST) within the UN system, chaired by UNDP and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), and with UNESCO and UNICEF leading on education; this remained the entry point for UN agencies throughout the process. Being a Rio+20 process, most countries were represented by their Ministries of Environment and/or Foreign Affairs, alongside diplomats from their respective missions to the UN in New York, while civil society participation was organised according to nine major groups.³ The process was cochaired by the Permanent Representatives of Kenya and Hungary, Macharia Kamau and Csaba Kőrösi, respectively.

At the time, the OWG was largely unknown outside the sustainable development community. The education community was focused on its own post-2015 process, which, given the scope of this chapter, I will consider an input to the broader UN process. Arguably, the education sector was the best prepared, considering that it had had more than 20 years of a common EFA agenda, providing the education community with a Framework for Action as well as dedicated mechanisms for coordination, monitoring, and follow-up, including the EFA Steering Committee and the EFA Global Monitoring Report. Moreover, education has its own dedicated UN agency and an established global coalition of civil society organisations. This architecture provided the basis for building a robust and representative joint position, with meetings and consultations being organised to draw on the EFA lessons learned (see also Chapter 9 by Yusuf Sayed and Kate Moriarty).

3 Setting the Scene: The First OWG Session on Education (June 2013)

Education was discussed at the 4th OWG session, held in June 2013. The session brief positioned education as ‘a fundamental human right and the bedrock of sustainable development’ (TST, 2013, p. 1), showcased its enabling role in relation to a range of development outcomes, presented the progress made under the MDGs, and identified remaining challenges.⁴

The remaining out-of-school population was the first challenge to be faced. It was followed by the learning crisis that the EFA Global Monitoring Report had identified in 2012:

Millions of children who go to school do not learn the basics. Out of around 650 million children of primary school age, as many as 250 million either do not reach grade 4 or, if they do, fail to attain minimum learning standards. (UNESCO, 2012b, p. 122)

Surprisingly, the brief separated learning from the structural dimensions of quality; only later in the text was it acknowledged that ‘inadequate attention had been paid to the financial, human capital, and infrastructural resource constraints which undermine progress towards achieving effective learning environments for quality education’, with the shortage of trained teachers as well as the stagnation of aid to education highlighted as key obstacles (TST, 2013, p. 2). While the emphasis on learning could be interpreted as a sign of feelings of urgency, EI was concerned that it had been disconnected from its causes.

The brief identified several priorities moving forward: access at all levels, equity, gender equality, relevant and measurable learning outcomes, skills and training, enabling learning environments, and sustainable financing. Interestingly, poverty and exclusion were described as ‘the major markers of disadvantage’ (TST, 2013, p. 2), but the direct link between costs of education and exclusion was not mentioned. This is extraordinary given the proven impact of abolishing tuition fees on enrolment figures in the MDG era. Another missing piece was the equity implications of the increasing role of nonstate actors in education. Perhaps this points to a broader problem: the briefs were effectively sales pitches for stand-alone goals, which compelled sectors to prove impact rather than engage in critical analyses.

Considering the OWG mandate, education for sustainable development was surprisingly low on the list of priorities. While the brief called for ‘knowledge, skills and competencies that are linked to 21st century livelihoods and employment, and contribute to shaping attitudes and behaviors that promote social inclusion and cohesion, and environmental sustainability’ (TST, 2013, p. 4), it was unclear on how and when these should be acquired. Bizarrely, the reported lack of learning only referred to literacy and numeracy.

Finally, the brief recommended merging the future development agenda with any future EFA goals, which raised questions about who had had the final say on the brief itself, as the EFA community was far from consensus at that stage. These briefs positioned UN agencies as purveyors of objective, technical advice, despite their different governance and financing arrangements, potentially ignoring biases and donor influence.

3.1 *Civil Society Takes the Floor*

Daily morning hearings were organised for civil society organisations (CSOs) to share their views. The process was based on the major groups self-organising: there was a steering committee of volunteers charged with selecting two presentations and eight shorter interventions for each hearing. There was no attempt to coordinate the inputs at this stage but rather ensure balanced

representation in terms of gender, geography, and areas of work. Opening the hearing, the cochair, Ambassador Kamau, stressed the need to identify the 'relative importance' of education and to discuss the means of implementation (author's notes).

Education International and the Youth Coalition from Ghana had been selected to present. Calling for *universal free quality education* as the new goal, EI argued for equity as the foundation for the right to education and highlighted the financial burden – tuition fees as well as indirect costs – on households as the single greatest barrier to education, necessitating a financing target. The second key message was a rights-based approach to quality, outlining some of the necessary inputs (safe schools with adequate facilities, resources and infrastructure, a broad curriculum, qualified teachers); processes (learner-centred pedagogical practices, support for teachers); and outcomes (critical thinking, problem-solving) (Education International, 2013). The co-chair's only response was questioning where the money would come from, to which we replied, *tax justice*, while the Major Group of Children and Youth called for a cap on military expenditure (author's notes).

The Youth Coalition also highlighted the need for equity and quality but focused on the relevance of education and skills. Other topics raised were poverty (ATD 4th World, SOS Children's Villages), children's rights and inclusion (Save the Children, World Vision), and girls' education and sexual and reproductive health (International Planned Parenthood Federation). Save the Children also mentioned learning outcomes as a priority, but as part of a more holistic view of quality education (author's notes).

Although few member states were represented at the hearing (Denmark, France, Ghana, and Ireland), it was an invaluable opportunity for CSOs to present their priorities and proposals, and CSO representatives were pleased with the cochairs' summary of the inputs from civil society:

Participants highlighted that education is at the core of sustainable development and the most effective way to poverty eradication. Education as an enabler for progress in other fields was stressed, including health and employment. Need to shift focus from the mere access to education to quality education, including adequate facilities, qualified teachers, good home-conditions, promotion of innovation, and civic mindedness, as well as measurable learning outcomes, was stressed by many. So was the need for free and equal access to education for all, including people with disabilities, children living in remote rural areas, and marginalized groups. Importance of lifelong learning was also raised. (OWG 4, 2013)

3.2 *The First Exchange on Priorities*

The OWG session on education opened with an external expert setting the scene. Karen Mundy, University of Toronto, articulated a powerful defence of education as a human right. While underlining that education must be directed toward the full development of human beings and respect for human rights, Mundy framed the role of the international community as one of setting-specific targets for progress, focussing on literacy as a baseline indicator of quality and equity, and the need for measuring learning outcomes. She called for early childhood and secondary education as well as skills development, and framed financing as a precondition for success, recommending targets for both national and international financing (author's notes).

The responses to Mundy's intervention were reassuring, signalling an understanding of the complexity of challenges faced in education: Ghana questioned the focus on knowledge and skills at the expense of values, attitudes, and a more holistic approach, and Pakistan queried whether it was feasible to go beyond primary education at this time. France inquired about sustainable financing, qualitative and quantitative indicators for equity and quality, the balance between the economic and the social objectives of education, and the role of new actors, such as civil society and the private sector (author's notes).

As member states then started reading their official statements, there was immediate consensus on there being both unfinished MDG business and new challenges that required action. Most countries highlighted the different groups that had been left behind thus far. In the words of the G77⁵ and China: 'We must ensure that not only a greater amount [*sic*] of children are educated, but also that the education these children receive is of high quality delivered by adequately qualified teachers' (OWG 4, 2013).

As expected, a majority of countries signalled a desire to go beyond the MDG promise of primary education, but CSO representatives were positively surprised by the level of ambition. The African group called for a stand-alone goal with both quantitative and qualitative targets for primary, secondary, vocational, and tertiary education. On behalf of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Benin suggested universal access and completion of quality education at the same four levels. India/Pakistan/Sri Lanka emphasised skills development through technical and vocational training, alongside universal access to primary and secondary education. Another noteworthy proposal was the LDCs' call for the abolition of tuition fees (OWG 4, 2013).

Benin described how poorly trained teachers, inadequate facilities, and crowded classrooms make quality education impossible and prevent progress at all levels. The systemic factors behind the lack of quality were further elaborated upon by Zambia/Zimbabwe:

MDG 2 focused on increasing numbers within the same and existing infrastructure and more [or] less the same levels of teachers, hence increasing the pupil teacher ratio, and sometimes using untrained teachers as in community and village schools, a situation which seriously compromised quality of education. (OWG 4, 2013)

Their representative went on to propose the following solutions:

... an increase in resources to education, a shift in programming and implementation modalities to ensure corresponding infrastructure development and supportive services to improve quality, that is to areas such as teachers training, curriculum development, and school requisites or learning aids provision, should be set up. (OWG 4, 2013)

A majority of countries also addressed the necessity to look at what is being learned. In the words of Canada/Israel/US:

We clearly need much more serious attention to the quality of education and to learning outcomes. What are children learning? How are they learning? Are youth developing economically relevant skills? Are they equipping themselves with the knowledge and perspectives to be engaged and tolerant citizens? ... Schooling should provide students with transferable skills that will prepare them for today's global marketplace. Investments in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education are one of the most critical sources of transformation. It is equally important to ensure that entrepreneurial skills be taught as a core component of school curricula across all levels. (OWG 4, 2013)

Here education was clearly framed as a means to other ends, mostly economic development and youth employment: the African group wanted education to 'support economies' transformation and to prepare citizens for productive employment based on requirements of new labour markets', while the Caribbean community (CARICOM) called for strengthened links between education, skills training and curriculum development, and labour market demands. But many looked at all three dimensions of sustainable development and stressed 'the importance of cross-curricular integration of education for sustainable development in all subjects' (Montenegro/Slovenia) and the 'promotion of [a] culture of dialogue, tolerance, respect for human rights, environment, and cultural diversity' (Bulgaria/Croatia). The many endorsements of education for sustainable development apparently surprised the Hungarian cochair,

who said that he had never thought of education as ‘what makes us capable of being drivers of sustainable development’; he called it ‘very deep thinking’ (OWG 4, 2013; author’s notes).

The broad range of issues raised by member states in their first exchange was a positive surprise. The cochairs’ summary of the discussion gave a first indication of what – and whom – they perceived as important, highlighting *human rights, equity of access, quality, and relevance*. Education being a basic right, they concluded ‘at the elementary level it should be not just affordable but free’, something that had mostly been raised by civil society. But their approach to equity, quality, and relevance was reductive. They called for ‘outcome-focused data if for example we want to measure not just schooling but learning for different social groups’, as stressed by Karen Mundy, and ‘more attention to learning outcomes in terms of literacy and numeracy’, disregarding the many references to other dimensions of quality, such as qualified teachers and safe learning environments’ (OWG 4, 2013).

On relevance, the cochairs exhibited a worryingly narrow view: ‘For most people, getting a quality education is first and foremost about qualifying for a good job. That means learning the right things, which could include science and mathematics, entrepreneurship, [and] vocational skills’ even if they then went on to recognise ‘education’s role in encouraging tolerance, active citizenship, and ... sustainable development’. The cochairs acknowledged the wish to go beyond primary education but ignored the many calls for vocational and tertiary education from so-called developing countries, while highlighting early childhood learning as ‘a firm foundation for formal schooling and lifelong learning’, which had been mentioned primarily by Organisation for Economic and Development (OECD) countries. Finally, they said that ‘one speaker stressed the importance of setting targets on financing – both domestic and international – to accompany an education goal’. This was an odd formulation that effectively played down the support for a financing target, given that many member states, particularly so-called developing countries, identified financing as a key challenge in past years and a precondition for success moving forward (OWG 4, 2013).

4 The First Months of Negotiations (March–April 2014)

After more than a year of thematic discussions, the OWG was finally ready to begin negotiations in March 2014.⁶ The co-chairs had summarised the outcomes of these discussions in 19 Focus Areas (OWG 9, 2014), which, of course, were assumed to be stand-alone goals in disguise. Each area had a short justification for its inclusion and a number of subareas for consideration.

Education was the fourth area and introduced as a right. In theory, not much should have changed from the cochairs' summary of the 4th session in June 2013, but the scope was broader than expected, ranging from early childhood education to lifelong learning, with secondary education framed as the minimum, which implies that the UN Technical Support Team had had a say too:

Box 2.1: Focus area 4. Education (March 2014)

Everyone has a right to education, which opens up lifelong opportunities and is critical to achieving poverty eradication across generations. Achieving universal access to and quality of education is also important in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women, and in shaping values and creating the necessary skilled and productive labour force. Some areas that could be considered include: universal primary education for girls and boys, significant progress towards ensuring that every child receives at least a secondary education, and lifelong learning opportunities; ensuring equitable access to education at all levels with focus on the most marginalized; achieving high completion rates at all levels of education; ensuring effective learning outcomes at all levels and imparting knowledge and skills that match the demands of the labour market, including through vocational training; universal adult literacy; improving access to education for persons with disabilities; extending where needed opportunities for early childhood education; integrating sustainable development in education curricula, including awareness raising on how diverse cultures advance sustainable development. (UN, 2014b)

While some member states expressed concern about the number of areas, nobody questioned the inclusion of education as an area. At the same time, only a handful of countries mentioned education explicitly; it enjoyed none of the buzz that more overlooked or controversial areas had in terms of perceived urgency. In fact, education was in a bit of a double-bind, being part of the unfinished business of the MDGs, but also one of the more successful goals. No country profiled itself as an education champion, neither those on the EFA Steering Committee⁷ nor the Global Education First Initiative, launched by the UN General Secretary in 2012 exactly to build support for and accelerate action on education. EI's advocacy was often met with a certain inattention or complacency; many felt that it went without saying that there would be an education goal and that it was more urgent to focus on other areas. Many gender

equality advocates, for instance, seemed tired of the singular focus on education in MDG 3, and thus were keen on putting education-related gender issues under the education goal, so that there would be space for the ‘truly urgent’ issues in the gender goal.

As the negotiation phase started, the major groups agreed to work on joint thematic statements, in addition to their constituency-based statements. Following negotiations in a joint Google document, the parties agreed to call for the completion of a full cycle of free quality education, from early childhood to upper secondary education, with trained and qualified teachers and safe learning environments, global citizenship as well as comprehensive sexuality education, and sustainable and public financing. Nobody thought that the number of demands or level of ambition were realistic, but the participants were determined to aim high – and frankly wanted to avoid the difficult negotiations on what or whose demand to delete.

The text of the revised Focus Areas (OWG 10, 2014), published ahead of the 10th OWG session (April 2014), was a victory in itself – as for the fourth focus area, it included ‘universal, free primary and secondary education’, which seemed to reflect the civil society proposal rather than that of any member state. ‘Universal early childhood education’ and ‘skills development’ had been added, but the reference to ‘quality’ had been removed and tertiary education was still missing.

Box 2.2: Focus area 4. Education (April 2014)

Everyone has a right to education. Achieving universal access to quality education is critical to poverty eradication across generations, opens up lifelong opportunities, promotes gender equality and women’s empowerment, shapes cultures, values and creates a skilled labour force. Some areas that could be considered include:

- a universal, free primary and secondary education for girls and boys;
- b ensuring equitable access to education at all levels with focus on the most marginalized, including indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, persons living in rural areas, and migrants;
- c achieving high completion rates at all levels of education for both girls and boys;
- d providing universal early childhood education;
- e ensuring effective learning outcomes at all levels and imparting knowledge and skills that match the demands of the labour market, including through vocational training and skills development for youth;

- f universal adult literacy and lifelong learning opportunities for all;
- g integrating sustainable development in education curricula, including awareness raising on how culture advances sustainable development;
- h and appropriate means of implementation (To be determined in the context of Focus area 18). (UN, 2014c)

While the support for a stand-alone goal on education remained high, the new format invited more specific comments from member states and differences in approaches and ambition started to become more visible. Surprisingly little was said about free education, but the African group called for affordable rather than free, which they considered to be more feasible, while Sri Lanka underlined that feasibility depends on the 'resource flow from affluent countries to developing countries'. Brazil/Nicaragua, emphasising the need to deliver on existing ODA commitments to education, called for 'conditional cash transfer schemes that combine income support with education responsibilities and health commitments', and proposed that education should be declared 'a national priority for all countries, developed and developing, keeping it shielded from cuts in national budgets'. France/Germany/Switzerland was the only northern troika to call for secured financing for education (OWG 10, 2014; author's notes).

Quality was highlighted as a priority by almost all. France/Germany/Switzerland proposed a new target: 'Improve quality of teaching & learning (Curriculums, infrastructure, training & teacher status, pupil-teacher ratios) and reduce inequalities with relevant and inclusive education programs, especially for girls' (OWG 10, 2014). Many also explicitly called for climate change to be addressed in curricula. Demands that had felt unrealistic a month earlier suddenly seemed more doable against the expanded focus area, which signalled an inclination for something more comprehensive.

EI coordinated the civil society statement on education, signed by the Major Groups of Children and Youth, Women, Indigenous Peoples, NGOs, and Workers and Trade Unions (OWG 10, 2014), reorganising the earlier demands into five targets⁸ under the goal of *Ensuring the right to free, equitable, quality education and lifelong learning for all*. CSO representatives struggled to agree on the desired level of ambition for postsecondary education. Nobody aimed for universal vocational or tertiary enrolment, and considering the limited progress globally, they feared that a call for free education at all levels would seem unreasonable. Eventually, the CSOs proposed *equitable access to postsecondary and lifelong learning*.

5 Goals and Targets in the Making: Emerging Areas of Contestation (May 2014)

The focus areas were redrafted as goals and targets ahead of the May 2014 OWG session (OWG 11, 2014). Member states were asked to make specific suggestions, including timeframes and measurable targets, and avoid additions unless accompanied by deletions. We feared this would mark a shift toward a debate driven by feasibility rather than ambition.

The proposed education goal – *Provide quality education and lifelong learning for all* – included the completion of free primary and secondary education and safe learning environments, as civil society had proposed, but universal early childhood education had been swapped for access to preprimary education.

Box 2.3: Focus area 4. Education and life-long learning (May 2014) Provide quality education and life-long learning for all

- a by 2030 ensure universal, free, equitable access to and completion of quality primary and secondary education for all girls and boys, leading to effective learning outcomes
- b ensure that persons with disabilities have access to inclusive education, skills development and vocational training
- c by 2030 increase by x% the proportion of children able to access and complete quality pre-primary education
- d by 2030 achieve universal youth and adult literacy, with particular attention to women and the most marginalized
- e by 2030 increase by x% the number of young and adult women and men with vocational training, technical, engineering and scientific skills
- f integrate relevant knowledge and skills in education curricula, including ICT skills, education for sustainable development, and awareness raising on culture's contribution to sustainable development
- g all schools to provide safe and healthy learning environment for all students Appropriate means of implementation (UN, 2014e)

By this stage of the process, the positions of member states as well as the areas of disagreement were clear. In the following section, I elaborate on the principal areas of contestation between member states as well as in relation to

civil society and its demands, that is: levels of education and notions of quality, learning outcomes beyond literacy and numeracy, teachers and learning environments, member state engagement with a rights-based education agenda, means of implementation, and disagreements within civil society.

5.1 *Setting the Right Level of Ambition: Levels of Education and Notions of Quality*

There was a reluctance to set specific targets beyond primary and lower secondary education. In private conversation, rich countries doubted poorer countries' ability to finance any further progress, while poor countries doubted the willingness of the rich to support their progress financially. At the same time, there was an urgency to increase enrolment at other levels. In the words of the African group: 'Research and development, capacity-building, science, technology and innovation ... cannot be guaranteed by narrowing education targets to pre-primary, primary, or even secondary levels' (OWG 11, 2014). They proposed universal enrolment and completion of primary education by 2020, and 80% enrolment and completion of secondary and tertiary education by 2030, effectively lowering the ambition for secondary education while increasing it for tertiary education. But most countries seemed satisfied with the emphasis on skills in the draft target, and only a handful of countries asked for tertiary to be included. Exact targets for levels of education could be conveniently avoided by emphasising skills or equal access. Other proposals at this stage included compulsory primary education (Mexico/Peru), 'at least 10 years of basic education ... in line with UNESCO's proposal' (Republic of Korea), and a separate target on universal access to lower secondary education (Pakistan) (OWG 11, 2014; author's notes).

The discussion on the levels of education was closely linked to that on the expected outcomes of and possible quality indicators at these different levels. While there had been consensus on quality education from the very beginning, it had never been defined, and at this stage of the negotiations, it was necessary to unpack the concept, particularly as the question of inputs versus outcomes was yet to be resolved.

While there were those who viewed completing a given level of education as a sufficient outcome, many argued for specifying the desired outcome of each level. Australia/Netherlands/UK wanted to 'learn the lesson from the MDGs and focus on education outcomes as well as access' and suggested one target on primary completion and 'minimum learning standards', and another one on lower secondary completion and 'recognised and measurable learning outcomes'. Further, they wanted to include upper secondary in the target on vocational and tertiary education: 'Increase the number of young and adult women

and men with the skills, including upper-secondary, technical, vocational, and tertiary, that support employment and economic growth' (OWG 11, 2014).

Canada/Israel/US said that inputs should be determined at national level, and thus suggested reframing the targets according to their expected outcomes: 'All girls and boys complete free and equitable quality basic education of at least 10 years and achieve relevant learning outcomes', and 'Ensure every child, regardless of circumstance, has access to lower secondary education and increase by x% the number of girls and boys meeting standards on tasks related to reading, mathematics, and scientific literacy'. They proposed *readiness to learn* as the outcome of preprimary education (OWG 11, 2014).

While the predominantly English-speaking countries were the loudest proponents of more outcome-focused targets, there was broad consensus on the importance of 'relevant and measurable learning outcomes', in the words of G77 and China (OWG 11, 2014). But while the idea of measurable learning outcomes had a lot of traction, none of the countries addressed the question of whether these outcomes should be determined at the national or global level, that is, whether they should be the same for all countries. Most countries hid behind concepts like *relevant*, *minimum learning standards*, or *skills for work and life*. Bangladesh called for a balance between inputs and outcomes, and emphasised life skills as a key part of the necessary measurable learning outcomes. The Republic of Korea stated that 'there is no particular reason to limit the virtues for youth and adults only to the areas of vocational training, technical, engineering, and scientific skills' and proposed 'by 2030 [to] increase by x% those youth and adults with knowledge & skills required for work and life'. Canada/Israel/US were thus the only countries to specify which subjects to measure (OWG 11, 2014).

5.2 *Beyond Literacy and Numeracy: Educating for the Labour Market and/or Sustainable Development*

Almost all countries called for skills for work. China/Indonesia/Kazakhstan emphasised 'access to labour market' as an outcome of education; Brazil/Nicaragua suggested bridging the gap between education and labour markets by specifying that learning outcomes should be 'aligned with labour market needs'; and the African group underscored the importance of vocational education and training, as well as skills development and universal youth and adult literacy. Canada/Israel/US recommended combining the target on vocational education and training with the one on relevant skills in curricula and suggested adding a reference to entrepreneurial education. Interestingly, there was no disagreement here; the problem was rather articulating the desired relationship between education and the labour market. Remarkably, civil society

struggled too; there was principled opposition to an instrumental approach to education, but there was no counterproposal and little targeted advocacy (OWG 11, 2014).

The target on relevant knowledge and skills enjoyed broad support, and there were numerous additions: Denmark/Ireland/Norway called for learning 'which is relevant for the daily lives of children and adolescents, including education on human rights, life skills, and comprehensive sexuality education'. Italy/Spain/Turkey wanted to include gender equality, nonviolence, and peace in curricula; Montenegro and Slovenia suggested health as well as human rights education; and the Republic of Korea asked for global citizenship education. A new target on eliminating gender stereotypes was suggested by Denmark/Ireland/Norway as well as France/Germany/Switzerland, while Argentina/Bolivia/Ecuador proposed a broader inclusion target: 'Implement by 20xx curriculum and educational practices that promote inclusive education towards people with disabilities, indigenous people, and all other historically excluded groups, and that eliminate gender stereotypes, sexism, and homophobia in order to eliminate all forms of discrimination and racism'. Interestingly, these proposals were separated from specific levels of education, and generally considered part of the calls for learning outcomes (OWG 11, 2014).

The only proposal that met resistance was comprehensive sexuality education. It was a priority for many European governments, but the African group was against the introduction of 'contentious concepts', Egypt found references to sexual education unacceptable, and Saudi Arabia warned that such references would 'weaken the chances of adoption'. Saudi Arabia later declared it did not want 'sexual things in school' (OWG 11, 2014; author's notes).

5.3 *Enabling Quality Education: Qualified Teachers and Safe Learning Environments*

As the cochairs had not picked up on earlier references to teachers and teacher training in their draft, numerous proposals were now made: 'Improve quality education by improving professional training for competent teachers' (Italy/Spain/Turkey) and 'Promote training and support for teachers and education professionals' (China/Indonesia/Kazakhstan). Bhutan/Thailand/Vietnam suggested support and incentives for professional development, while the African group wanted to improve the 'conditions of service of educators and trainers'. EI was particularly pleased with Belarus/Serbia proposing that 'all learners are taught by qualified, professionally trained, motivated and well-supported teachers', in line with the Muscat Agreement and EI's advocacy. EI was further encouraged by cochair Kamau interrupting the debate to check whether he was right to think that there was consensus on qualified teachers as a priority.

At the same time, many countries framed qualified teachers as part of the necessary means of implementation for education (OWG 11, 2014; author's notes).

Safe and adequate learning environments were another quality dimension stressed by countries. Denmark/Ireland/Norway, for instance, called for 'an environment free from sexual harassment in schools. This should include making schools safer for girls, having a high proportion of female teachers, and adequate sanitation for both boys and girls in schools'. These calls built on lessons learned from the MDGs about obstacles to girls' education but were also a reaction to the recent abduction of hundreds of school girls in Nigeria. In line with their emphasis on outcomes, Canada/Israel/US questioned the definition of *healthy* learning environments and suggested 'ensur[ing] that all children and youth can safely access school without fear of harm, abuse, or discrimination'. To EI's surprise, several Latin American countries suggested adding 'that schools are also inclusive and respectful for both students and teachers' (Brazil/Nicaragua), but this was not supported (OWG 11, 2014).

5.4 *Delivering on Human Rights and Equity Pledges*

While many member states began their education statements with references to education as a human right and a public good, France/Germany/Switzerland went the furthest in trying to reflect this in their proposals:

Education is a human right, a global public good, and a major driver for reducing inequalities and poverty as well as being a prerequisite for sustainable development. We propose that the choice and definition of targets under this goal be framed around the four principles of: accessibility, acceptability, adaptability, and availability. (OWG 11, 2014)

However, they never spelled out what this would mean for the proposed targets. Denmark/Ireland/Norway underlined that 'universal, free, equitable access to quality education' is consistent with the right to education, while Romania called for a rights-based approach, highlighting safe and secure environments as a precondition for access and completion (OWG 11, 2014).

There was consensus on the commitment to equity and leaving no one behind, an approach that was generally considered helpful for realising the right to education. In the words of Australia/Netherlands/UK, leaving no one behind 'requires a non-discriminatory approach that respects human rights of all. We need to ensure targets are met by all, including the special circumstances of children with disabilities, those from the lowest income quintile, and other disadvantaged groups'. Denmark/Ireland/Norway highlighted 'the

urgent need to ensure access to education for children in conflict and humanitarian situations' (OWG 11, 2014).

However, *leaving no one behind* quickly became an empty slogan. In fact, its loudest proponents were also those torpedoing proposals for measures to combat (income) inequality. Perhaps the equity consensus prevailed exactly because of countries actively avoiding the discussion on what it would mean in practice. This was also the case for equitable education: any equity implications of weakened and underfunded public systems were ignored. The representative of Pakistan asked incredulously in a side meeting whether it is 'possible to have the president's son in the same school as a poor village boy'. Instead of discussing the measures required to enable this – policies that reduce structural inequalities – there was disagreement over which groups to mention, and how to refer to them; some preferred 'most vulnerable' over 'most marginalised', while others wanted to refer to populations rather than groups (author's notes).

5.5 *Making It Happen: The Question of Means of Implementation*

The means of implementation (MOI) had been a dividing line between rich and poor countries from the very beginning; the former were against goal-specific means of implementation, the latter considered them a prerequisite for the success of the new agenda. The cochairs had added 'appropriate MOI' as a placeholder under each goal, inviting member states to make suggestions.

The G77 and China called on developed countries to support efforts in developing countries through provision of financial resources, capacity-building, and technology transfer. Most G77 countries suggested a target on higher education scholarships: *Expand by x% globally the number of scholarships for students from developing countries, in particular LDCs, to enrol in higher education programmes in developed countries and other developing countries, with focus on science, engineering, and management* (OWG 11, 2014). EI's attempts to highlight the detrimental effects of such a target in terms of 'brain drain' as well as the systemic underdevelopment of the higher education sector in their own countries were falling on deaf ears; instead, some countries suggested adding scholarships for civil servants.

The LDCs made two specific proposals: 'Promote students exchange programmes, joint researches, and access to digital libraries', and 'Provide enhanced financial and technical support for LDCs to implement their national education plans and programmes with special emphasis on educational infrastructure building, including modern facilities and equipment and qualified teachers'. The latter, in particular, shows that they considered all the inputs necessary for the targets to be reached as a means of implementation. In the

same vein, the African group suggested investing in learning infrastructure, alongside improving the quality and conditions of service for educators and trainers, and Brazil/Nicaragua proposed to 'improve education infrastructure in developing countries, in particular in LDCs, by 2030' (OWG 11, 2014).

While welcoming these nonfinancial means of implementation, EI was concerned about the absence of demands on financing. France/Germany/Switzerland suggested 'ensuring adequate financial and human resources to ensure quality education and lifelong learning', and Bhutan/Thailand/Vietnam asked for a global partnership to support capacity-building and training, scholarships, research and development, and transfer of knowledge. But it was civil society (Major Groups of Workers and Trade Unions, Women, Children and Youth, NGOs, and Indigenous Peoples) that kept raising education financing, requesting that, 'by 2030, sustained and sufficient financing is in place to guarantee free quality education for all, including in emergencies' (OWG 11, 2014).

5.6 *The Civil Society Contingent and Its Views*

Many civil society organisations in the education field focused primarily on the post-EFA process. At first, it was only Save the Children and Education International who worked to influence the OWG, but in the late autumn of 2013, the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) and the International Council on Adult Education (ICAE) came aboard too. Others contributing to the advocacy efforts on education included the major groups of NGOs, Women, Children and Youth, Indigenous Peoples, Workers and Trade Unions, and disability organisations. Some local and national organisations attended specific meetings, but their presence tended to depend on dedicated external funding.

Views of civil society were divergent at the start of the process, with many groups and constituencies having very specific demands. The months of forging joint statements helped build consensus on a set of common priorities: equity and quality, financing and free education, and qualified teachers and safe learning environments. But often consensus was built on a generous acceptance of each other's demands, which meant that the list of demands grew longer and longer. That process may have been to blame for the breadth of Target 4.7, for instance.⁹ At the same time, CSOs were encouraged by both member states and the cochairs taking on board many of their suggestions.

The only major matter of disagreement among CSOs was the role of learning outcomes. It could be described as a battle between education and learning (for more on this, see Chapter 9). A rights-based view of education, defined by its breadth and championed by EI, GCE, and ICAE, was pitted against a focus on learning, where measurable learning outcomes were seen as the key to both equity and quality, advocated by Save the Children and a number of smaller

organisations. This defining division within the education CSO community was difficult to understand for others, but the two groups organised events, mobilised for joint statements, and argued about the civil society statement at each OWG session. The emphasis on *relevant* learning outcomes was one of the many compromises made; it was understood to include literacy and numeracy as well as a broad range of subjects and indigenous knowledge, which allowed CSOs to avoid conflict and make statements in the allocated two-minute speaking slots, but also left their demands open to interpretation.

6 The Last Stretch (June–July 2014)

While the education sector had reached agreement on its own post-2015 proposal, the OWG process had moved faster than expected: once the Global Education Meeting took place, postponed from March to May 2014, and stakeholders had adopted a goal and a set of seven targets as part of the Muscat Agreement, the consensus-building process of the OWG had reached a point at which there was little appetite for accepting larger chunks of text from external processes. At the 11th OWG session, France/Germany/Switzerland had stated that ‘we must ensure the coherence of the total package of targets under this goal which should be geared toward sustainable development and be closely aligned with those currently being defined in the context of the Education for All Framework for Action’ (OWG 11, 2014). The identity of *we* was, however, unclear, because it was up to the member states to replace OWG formulations with those of the Muscat Agreement.

With the publication of a zero draft of the proposed SDGs and targets at its 12th session on 2 June 2014 (OWG 12, 2014; UN, 2014d), the OWG moved into a new phase. Informal sessions were organised, and focus shifted toward the more contentious issues, which meant that the education targets escaped more detailed scrutiny. In an informal discussion that I had with cochair Kamau, he expressed his surprise at anyone being concerned about the education goal, as it enjoyed, in his view, enough support to be safely adopted. Despite his reasoned focus on the bigger picture, his comments belied a lack of understanding of education policy, and more importantly, how little room the OWG process itself left for sector-specific expertise. Building political agreement was more important than the technical robustness of any single goal and its targets.

The zero draft contained a number of improvements: CSO proposals of *relevant* learning outcomes and new specific targets on teachers as well as higher education had been included, but the new formulations were weak.

Box 2.4: Proposed goal 4. Provide equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all (June 2014)

- 4.1 by 2030 ensure all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes
- 4.2 by 2030 ensure equal access for all to affordable quality tertiary education and life-long learning
- 4.3 by 2030 increase by x% the proportion of children able to access and complete inclusive quality pre-primary education and other early childhood development programmes
- 4.4 achieve universal youth literacy and basic numeracy and an increase by x% of adult literacy and basic numeracy by 2030
- 4.5 by 2030 increase by x% the number of young and adult women and men with the skills needed for employment, including vocational training, ICT, technical, engineering and scientific skills
- 4.6 by 2030 ensure that people in vulnerable situations and marginalized people including persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples have access to inclusive education, skills development and vocational training aligned with labour market needs
- 4.7 by 2030 integrate relevant knowledge and skills in education curricula and training programs, including education for sustainable development and awareness raising on culture's contribution to sustainable development
- 4.8 by 2030 ensure that all schools and other educational institutions provide safe, healthy, non-discriminatory and inclusive learning environments for all
- 4.9 by 2030 enhance the quality of teaching through promoting training for teachers (UN, 2014d)

Civil society kept fighting for a higher level of ambition: CSOs wanted to *ensure* rather than *provide* in the goal itself, *free* rather than *affordable* higher education, and *universal* adult literacy. They also repeated their call for the Muscat teacher target – ensuring that all learners are taught by qualified, professionally trained, motivated, and well-supported teachers – and sustained and sufficient financing (OWG 12, 2014).

The EFA community made a last attempt to influence the OWG by organising a side event on the Muscat Agreement, hosted by Norway, Brazil, Argentina, UNESCO, and UNICEF. The government representatives made strong

interventions, pledging to incorporate the Muscat language on teachers and financing, and Argentina consequently called for a financing target in the OWG session.

The last round of negotiations in July 2014 kicked off with some dramatic changes in the education goal: it finally included a financing target, but the targets on teacher training and scholarships had been merged. Many member states agreed with CSOs that the latter did not make sense and called for a separate target on teachers, and several countries proposed the Muscat formulation. Regrettably, many also demanded that the financing target be deleted.

Much of the action was taking place in corridors and closed meeting rooms, and it was hard to understand the logic of change at this stage. Several countries wanted to make the first nine years of education compulsory, in line with the Muscat Agreement. But this led Denmark/Ireland/Norway to propose limiting the first target to primary and lower secondary education, which would not only have excluded upper secondary from the free and universal levels of education but from the whole agenda. Informally, Norway said that universal upper secondary was unrealistic, even if it is, of course, the norm in Norway. Fortunately, it was too late for such a substantial change to be made (author's notes).

At the same time, Canada/Israel/US called for deletion of target 4.7 on integrating relevant knowledge in curricula, arguing that it was too prescriptive for countries. This was astonishing given that they had been the only troika to propose subject-specific learning outcomes to be measured under target 4.1. Nonetheless, the formulation was subsequently changed to 'ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development' (author's notes), which raised questions about the pressure exercised behind the scenes.

Australia/Netherlands/UK suggested merging the target on vocational and tertiary education with that on skills acquisition, which made sense and was welcomed by the co-chairs, but mysteriously never made it to the next draft. The battle about comprehensive sexuality education continued in a break-out group, but no compromise was ultimately found; it was too controversial and highly symbolic given the lack of earlier intergovernmental agreements.

7 Agreement on Goals and Targets

The OWG adopted the 17 goals and 169 targets unanimously in July 2014 (see Table 1.1 in Chapter 1).

Far from perfect, the education goal nevertheless exceeded our expectations; nobody had imagined as many as ten targets, ranging from the completion of free primary and secondary education, and equal access to postsecondary, including tertiary education, to targets on education for sustainable development and human rights, safe learning environments, and qualified teachers. Within the education community, the Muscat Agreement was the obvious yardstick, and the OWG measured up surprisingly well: While obvious that the goal and targets had not been crafted by education experts, they were more ambitious than the Muscat Agreement with regard to universal completion of free upper secondary and safe learning environments, for example. This had been inconceivable at the start of the post-2015 process.

But there were serious shortcomings: There was no financing target, the teacher target was weak, early childhood education was not even mentioned, and vocational and higher education were only described as *affordable*. Many formulations could have been sharper, but that in combination with the unfinished nature of some targets, such as those referring to an increase of 'x%', gave the impression that improvements were still possible – an impression that many countries seemed to share.

While almost all countries had reservations regarding the OWG outcome, the ownership of both the text and the process eased its final adoption. Instead of traditional word-by-word negotiations, the co-chairs had built a process of gradual consensus-building, adding more detail to the draft on a monthly basis, testing the waters, and incorporating the feedback. But this made for a complicated relationship with the many processes aimed at informing the post-2015 agenda. The OWG merely welcomed the different inputs and remained loyal to its own process, undermining other efforts. However, the outcomes of those other processes were often picked up by other actors and reflected in their positions, and may, thus, have influenced the OWG deliberations.

It had been impossible to foresee the OWG developing the new agenda from beginning to end, but the 'delicate balance' achieved through the OWG was considered too delicate to be touched in the subsequent intergovernmental negotiations (January–August 2015), despite persistent efforts to reduce the number of goals. Most member states wanted to change individual targets, but none of them wanted to start negotiations from scratch. It soon became clear that only targets with obvious technical flaws were likely to change, which in the case of education meant those referring to 'x%'. At the same time, the most difficult issues were yet to be agreed upon: monitoring, accountability, and means of implementation.

In these subsequent negotiations, member states rejected monitoring and accountability in favour of the ambiguous *follow-up and review*, essentially

TABLE 2.1 Evolution of the wording of the education targets during OWG negotiations, March–July 2014

	March 2014	April 2014	May 2014	June 2014	Adopted in July 2014
Title	Focus area 4. Education	Focus area 4. Education	Focus area 4. Education and lifelong learning; Provide quality education and lifelong learning for all	Proposed goal 4. Provide equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all	Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
Rights-Based Approach	Everyone has a right to education, which opens up lifelong opportunities and is critical to achieving poverty eradication across generations.	Everyone has a right to education.			

(cont.)

TABLE 2.1 Evolution of the wording of the education targets during OWG negotiations, March–July 2014 (*cont.*)

	March 2014	April 2014	May 2014	June 2014	Adopted in July 2014
Interlinkages with other areas	[Education is] critical to achieving poverty eradication across generations. Achieving universal access to and quality of education is also important in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women, and in shaping values and creating the necessary skilled and productive labour force.	Achieving universal access to quality education is critical to poverty eradication across generations, opens up lifelong opportunities, promotes gender equality and women's empowerment, shapes cultures, and values and creates a skilled labour force.			

(*cont.*)

TABLE 2.1 Evolution of the wording of the education targets during OWG negotiations, March–July 2014 (*cont.*)

	March 2014	April 2014	May 2014	June 2014	Adopted in July 2014
Early childhood education	extending where needed opportunities for early childhood education	d) providing universal early childhood education	c) by 2030 increase by x% the proportion of children able to access and complete quality preprimary education	4.3 by 2030 increase by x% the proportion of children able to access and complete inclusive quality preprimary education and other early childhood development programmes	4.2 by 2030 ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and preprimary education so that they are ready for primary education
Primary and secondary education	universal primary education for girls and boys; significant progress toward ensuring that every child receives at least a secondary education	a) universal, free primary and secondary education for girls and boys	a) by 2030 ensure universal, free, equitable access to and completion of quality primary and secondary education for all girls and boys, leading to effective learning outcomes	4.1 by 2030 ensure all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes	4.1 by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes

(cont.)

TABLE 2.1 Evolution of the wording of the education targets during OWG negotiations, March–July 2014 (*cont.*)

	March 2014	April 2014	May 2014	June 2014	Adopted in July 2014
Vocational education	... imparting knowledge and skills that match the demands of the labour market, including through vocational training	e) ... imparting knowledge and skills that match the demands of the labour market, including through vocational training and skills development for youth	e) by 2030 increase by x% the number of young and adult women and men with vocational training, technical, engineering, and scientific skills	4.5 by 2030 increase by x% the number of young and adult women and men with the skills needed for employment, including vocational training, ICT, technical, engineering, and scientific skills	4.3 by 2030 ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university
Higher education				4.2 by 2030 ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable quality tertiary education and lifelong learning	4.3 by 2030 ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university
					(<i>cont.</i>)

TABLE 2.1 Evolution of the wording of the education targets during OWG negotiations, March–July 2014 (cont.)

	March 2014	April 2014	May 2014	June 2014	Adopted in July 2014
Adult education and lifelong learning	significant progress towards ... lifelong learning opportunities; universal adult literacy	f) universal adult literacy and lifelong learning opportunities for all	d) by 2030 achieve universal youth and adult literacy, with particular attention to women and the most marginalised	4.2 by 2030 ensure equal access for all to affordable, quality tertiary education and lifelong learning	4.6 by 2030 ensure that all youth and at least x% of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy
Access Versus completion	achieving high completion rates at all levels of education	c) achieving high completion rates at all levels of education for both girls and boys		4.4 achieve universal youth literacy and basic numeracy and an increase by x% of adult literacy and basic numeracy by 2030	

(cont.)

TABLE 2.1 Evolution of the wording of the education targets during OWG negotiations, March–July 2014 (*cont.*)

	March 2014	April 2014	May 2014	June 2014	Adopted in July 2014
Equity and Inclusion	ensuring equitable access to education at all levels with focus on the most marginalised; improving access to education for persons with disabilities	b) ensuring equitable access to education at all levels with focus on the most marginalised, including indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, persons living in rural areas, and migrants	b) ensure that persons with disabilities have access to inclusive education, skills development, and vocational training	4.6 by 2030 ensure that people in vulnerable situations and marginalised people, including persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples have access to inclusive education, skills development, and vocational training aligned with labour market needs	4-5 by 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations
Learning Outcomes	ensuring effective learning outcomes at all levels and imparting knowledge and skills that match the demands of the labour market	e) ensuring effective learning outcomes at all levels and imparting knowledge and skills that match	a) ... quality primary and secondary education for all girls and boys, leading to	4.1 ... quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes	4.1 ... quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes

(*cont.*)

TABLE 2.1 Evolution of the wording of the education targets during OWG negotiations, March–July 2014 (*cont.*)

	March 2014	April 2014	May 2014	June 2014	Adopted in July 2014
Learning outcomes (<i>cont.</i>)		the demands of the labour market, including through vocational training and skills development for youth	effective learning outcomes f) integrate relevant knowledge and skills in education curricula, including ICT skills, education for sustainable development, and awareness raising on culture's contribution to sustainable development		

(*cont.*)

TABLE 2.1 Evolution of the wording of the education targets during OWG negotiations, March–July 2014 (*cont.*)

	March 2014	April 2014	May 2014	June 2014	Adopted in July 2014
Skills	ensuring effective learning outcomes at all levels and imparting knowledge and skills that match the demands of the labour market	e) ensuring effective learning outcomes at all levels and imparting knowledge and skills that match the demands of the labour market, including vocational training and skills development for youth	e) by 2030 increase by x% the number of young and adult women and men with vocational training, technical, engineering, and scientific skills	4.5 by 2030 increase by x% the number of young and adult women and men with the skills needed for employment, including vocational training, ICT, technical, engineering, and scientific skills	4.4 by 2030, increase by x% the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship
Education for Sustainable Development	integrating sustainable development in education curricula, including awareness	g) integrating sustainable development in education curricula, including awareness	f) integrate relevant knowledge and skills in education curricula,	4.7 by 2030 integrate relevant knowledge and skills in education curricula and training programs, including	4.7 by 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education

(*cont.*)

TABLE 2.1 Evolution of the wording of the education targets during OWG negotiations, March–July 2014 (cont.)

	March 2014	April 2014	May 2014	June 2014	Adopted in July 2014
Learning Environments	raising on how diverse cultures advance sustainable development.	raising on how culture advances sustainable development	including ICT skills, education for sustainable development, and awareness raising on culture's contribution to sustainable development g) all schools to provide safe and healthy learning environment for all students	education for sustainable development and awareness raising on culture's contribution to sustainable development	for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development 4.a build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability, and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all
					(cont.)

TABLE 2.1 Evolution of the wording of the education targets during OWG negotiations, March–July 2014 (*cont.*)

	March 2014	April 2014	May 2014	June 2014	Adopted in July 2014
Teachers				4.9 by 2030 enhance the quality of teaching through promoting training for teachers	4.c by 2030 increase by x% the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially LDCs and SIDS
Financing/ MOI		and appropriate means of implementation (To be determined in the context of Focus area 18)	appropriate means of implementation		4.b by 2020 expand by x% globally the number of scholarships for developing countries in particular LDCs, SIDS, and African countries to enrol in higher education, including vocational training, ICT, technical, engineering, and scientific programmes in developed countries and other developing countries

making the implementation voluntary. They delegated the agreement on SDG indicators to the UN Statistical Commission, who, in turn, established a dedicated expert group. What started as a renewed partnership between governments to ensure the realisation of the SDGs quickly turned into partnerships in plural, referring mainly to partnerships with the private sector. The many CSOs campaigning against public-private partnerships and the privatisation of public services led cochair Kamau to suggest a ringfencing of public services, including education, but member states did not support this. Consequently, neither governments nor the private sector are held to account within the SDGs framework.

The contentious question of means of implementation was largely delegated to the Financing for Development process (FfD), geared toward its fourth conference in July 2015, despite the different scopes and mandates of the two processes. The overarching narrative was that the resources needed were beyond what any state could provide. The proposed formulation on nationally appropriate spending targets on essential public services, including health and education, was rejected by several member states who considered it too prescriptive – to which the Norwegian cofacilitator responded that he thought health and education would be uncontroversial. The only achievement with regard to education financing was the deletion of a paragraph asking households to use remittances to pay for education and healthcare (author's notes).

8 Conclusions

Barely had the SDGs been adopted before attempts were made to misrepresent the education goal's priorities. Some decided to exclude the means of implementation targets (4.a–c) while others framed it as an agenda for learning outcomes only. This chapter has aimed to challenge such reinterpretations by documenting the process. The danger with as broad an agenda as the SDGs is that one can pick and choose among targets, taking advantage of the room for interpretation that many targets leave. At the same time, this is an opportunity: SDG 4 requires countries to agree on what concepts such as *equitable*, *free*, and *quality* mean in their context and education systems, and to find ways of operationalising them.

Reflecting on what we can take away from the process as we work to realise SDG 4, I will discuss three dimensions: (i) the level of inclusion within the process, (ii) silos and incoherence within the UN system as well as at national level, and (iii) the absence of education champions.

8.1 *Inclusion in Negotiation Processes*

Whilst the OWG process was both inclusive and participatory, with open as well as webcast meetings and dedicated exchanges with civil society at every round of negotiations, it was inclusive predominantly for those who knew to follow it from the beginning and how to engage with the UN system. As a global trade union federation, Education International had access to both information and meetings through its membership in the Workers and Trade Unions Major Group. But many organisations joining toward the end of the OWG were frustrated about what they perceived as a 'done deal'.

Inclusion should also be discussed with a view to the sector-specific inputs. The education community took its time agreeing on a robust proposal, assuming that it would be respected and included by the OWG. There was a problem with the timeline – adopting the Muscat Agreement six months earlier would have allowed for targeted advocacy at the right time – but the OWG should have paid more attention to such inputs.

Considering how open the OWG process was, it is oddly difficult to trace wording back to a particular country. Many governments had pet concerns and red lines, but surprisingly few seemed to have a comprehensive vision of the new agenda. While this made it difficult to gauge how fair the cochairs were in their drafting, it also made it easier for civil society to influence the process. Once CSOs had agreement, they had considerable influence on substance as well as ambition, and many of the weakest targets reflected the absence of a common civil society proposal. Yet, CSOs could have exploited this far more had they realised how broad the scope for influence really was.

8.2 *Silos and Policy Incoherence*

Ironically, while Agenda 2030 pledges to challenge and overturn silos, the process itself was a blatant reminder of the siloed approaches within the UN system as well as national policymaking. Looking back, education was worryingly invisible at the UN headquarters. UNESCO should have prioritised education – alongside culture, on which they focused in the early days of the process – and had a stronger presence in New York, actively seeking to provide support as well as food for thought as member states engaged in discussions about development beyond 2015, for instance by organising side events in conjunction with OWG sessions. By the same token, the EFA Steering Committee could have played a more active role.

Yet, the incoherence at country-level was a more serious problem. The most extreme example of this was Ministers of Education adopting the Muscat Agreement, while their governments negotiated a different education goal within the OWG at the very same time. The fact that remarkably few member

states promoted the Muscat Agreement in the OWG negotiations raised questions about national-level policy coherence and determination. It seemed as though many countries never involved their Ministries of Education in determining their OWG positions. EI's advocacy was most effective when its members (education unions and teacher organisations) shared its position with their governments, and EI followed up with the representatives at the negotiations. But in surprisingly many cases, EI's members struggled to find out exactly where their country position was determined, that is, by whom and in which ministry. This suggests a less inclusive process at the national level. In fact, civil society present at the negotiations at the UN seemed to have more access to the OWG than both national education policymakers and CSOs trying to influence their government's position.

Identifying those exercising pressure behind the scenes and on whom member states drew for advice and expertise is even harder. Many perceived UNICEF as more influential and present in New York, while UNESCO seemed to rely on individual member states to speak on its behalf. The Global Monitoring Report was a source of information throughout the process, and I suspect the World Bank and the OECD shaped the thinking of many member states. There were also significant changes in country positions – many African countries, for instance, abandoned their ambitious targets on teacher training and education financing – and one can only speculate about the extent of influence exerted by traditional donor countries. But the donors' rejection of all proposed aid and financing targets, including financial assistance for qualified teachers, did limit the scope of what was perceived to be possible. In this way, the rich countries won the battle over the means of implementation.

The absence of a financing target will have serious consequences for the success of SDG 4, and directly undermines the commitment to *leaving no one behind*. Early in the negotiations, Brazil problematised the notion of the private sector as a silver bullet and described it as an issue that will 'determine the future of [the] UN and development' (author's notes), but the question of public or private education was largely ignored. Today it would be more difficult to ignore the role of private actors and their impact on equity and quality in education in such a process; yet, we are nowhere closer to a political commitment to public education.

8.3 *Absence of Education Champions*

Providing an insight into how nonspecialists view education, the OWG signalled consistent but quiet support for education. While there were no outspoken opponents – aside from those opposed to commitments on sexuality education and financing – neither was there anyone championing education

and taking strategic ownership of the goal-in-the-making. It is hard to tell whether this was due to complacency, assuming that there would be an education goal, or a failure to understand the urgency of education progress in relation to sustainable development. What is clear, however, is that the implementation phase requires more active support, as sectors compete for financing as well as policy attention.

How countries respond to these three issues – inclusion, silos and policy incoherence, and lack of education champions – will determine the success of SDG 4. Even if few countries involved civil society at the national level in the negotiation phase, implementing the agenda requires the systematic involvement of those at the centre of education – teachers and education workers, students, and other stakeholders. At the same time, the SDGs are a much-needed reminder of the role of education in relation to other development priorities, and how investments in health and education, for instance, reinforce and support each other; the SDGs oblige governments to take a more holistic approach to education. Finally, SDG 4 opens up new spaces for countries to champion education and take the lead in making quality education for all a reality. The question is whether any country will step up to the challenge.

Notes

- 1 Note on sources: Representing Education International, I was a direct participant in almost all the events and meetings described and analysed in this chapter. Wherever possible, I have cited official, published documents as evidence for the statements and views presented. For some issues, I have drawn from the extensive notes that I took at each event.
- 2 For a list of the full membership, see <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/owg>
- 3 These modalities were determined by Agenda 21. The nine major groups are Women, Children and Youth, Indigenous Peoples, NGOs, Local Authorities, Workers and Trade Unions, Business and Industry, Scientific and Technological Community, and Farmers. Education International is a member of the Workers and Trade Unions group.
- 4 The brief was produced by UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA, WFP, ILO, ITU, UNV, OHCHR, PSO, UNDP, and IFAD.
- 5 The Group of 77 is the largest intergovernmental organisation of developing countries in the United Nations, currently representing 134 countries.
- 6 For a summary of how the detailed wording of the education targets evolved during the most active period of OWG negotiations (March–July 2014), see Table 2.1.

- 7 Composed of representatives from Member States, EFA convening agencies, EFA-FTI, civil society, and the private sector, the Steering Committee provided strategic guidance on all aspects of Education for All (UNESCO, 2011).
- 8 Completion of full cycle of free quality education (ECE to upper secondary education); equitable access to postsecondary and lifelong learning; trained and qualified teachers and safe learning environments; relevant quality education, including education for sustainable development and global citizenship; and sustained and sufficient financing.
- 9 '4.7: By 2030 ensure all learners acquire 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 nonviolence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development' (UNGA, 2015b, p. 17).