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The MDGs, girls' education and gender equality

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The MDGs has a rather narrow conception of girls' education. In this framework the focus on girls' education is expressed in the target that all girls and boys complete a full cycle of primary education (MDG2). Girls' education is also evident in the target in MDG3 to eliminate gender disparity at all levels of education; indicators for this measure gender parity in enrolments and literacy levels in young adult women.

Have the MDGs fostered progress on girls' education?

When reviewing the expansion of provision in education for all children since 2000, and the special attention given to girls, it is difficult to separate out a causal impetus that can be linked to the MDGs, isolated from other contemporaneous initiatives. Some global frameworks that complemented the MDGs are associated) with the Education for All (EFA) Dakar Platform of Action¹, also adopted in 2000, which had six key areas, and provided a perspective on girls'

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

¹ The goals for the Dakar Platform of Action are:

- The expansion and improvement of early childhood education
- Access to free, compulsory education of good quality for all children
- All learning to be appropriate for children, and life skills included in learning
- Improvement in levels of adult literacy
- Gender disparities in primary and secondary education to be removed
- All aspects of quality of education, including measurable learning outcomes, to be improved (Dakar Framework, 2000, pp. 15-17)

education that linked it with health, education quality, life skills, and support for adult literacy and the stipulations ii) the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which set out protection for children from violence and exploitation; iii) the Beijing Platform of Action, which linked girls' schooling with wider sites of learning for women and approaches to gender mainstreaming.

In taking forward these education visions there was some disconnection between different constituencies, possibly associated with the perception that different MDGs were 'owned' by different sectors within the UN (Waage et al, 2010). Most notably the women's rights networks had little dialogue with the education networks, mobilised around EfA (Unterhalter, 2007). With regard to EfA, there was a mobilisation for short, intense periods of activity, of a large NGO and trade union alliance of education activists in the Global Campaign on Education (GCE) that worked to raise the profile of the girls' education issue, and alert large donors to its significance (Verger et al, 2012). The work of UNGEI, and its location in UNICEF, helped build regional networks focussed on girls' education (Fyles, 2013; Unterhalter and North, 2011). These global initiatives were complemented by work in particular countries where education ministers, or governments, sometimes in response to women's rights or education activists, expanded primary education, often with special campaigns aimed at ensuring girls were sent to school. Thus, reviewing the period since 2000, the MDGs were not the only impetus for the expansion of girls' education. They complemented a whole host of global, regional, national and local initiatives that were going in the same direction.

Table 1 presents UNESCO figures on the decrease in the number of children out of school between 1999 and 2000, and the changing ratio of girls in different regions

	Children out of school in 1999	% girls out of school 1999	Children out of school 2010	% girls out of school 2010
	000		000	
Arab states	8423	59	5036	61
Central & Eastern Europe	1644	57	931	49
Central Asia	439	52	317	54
East Asia & Pacific	10344	51	6579	44
Latin America/Caribbean	3607	55	2652	50
N. America/W. Europe	901	48	1267	45
South & West Asia	40081	64	13261	55
Sub-Saharan Africa	42174	54	30641	53
World	107614	58	60684	53

Source: UNESCO, 2012, 354-5

It can be seen that in every region of the world the numbers of children out of school has come down, and only in one region (Central Asia) were girls a larger proportion of children out of school in 2010 than in 1999. Concerted efforts to support girls to go to school have thus seen progress.

However, that progress has been more dramatic in relation to enrolling in primary school, rather than completing. Table 2 shows the changing gender parity index² of the net enrolment rate³ in primary education between 1999 and 2010 in different regions, and the percentage of girls remaining at school to the last grade of the primary cycle.

	GPI of NER in 1999	% girls completing last grade of primary school 1999	GPI of NER in 2010	% girls completing last grade of primary school 2009
Arab states	0.90	89	0.94	90
Central & Eastern Europe	0.98	97	0.99	98
Central Asia	0.99	93	0.98	97
East Asia & Pacific	0.99		1.00	
Latin America/Caribbean	0.98	85	0.99	91
N. America/W. Europe	1.00	98	1.00	
South & West Asia	0.83		0.98	71
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.87	58	0.95	64

.(UNESCO, 2012, 355;363)

Table 2 indicates that the primary NER has increased in all regions between 1999 and 2009 (although it is still low in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab states), and the proportion of girls completing a full primary cycle has increased in all the regions for which there is data. However, in Sub-Saharan Africa less than two thirds of all girls who enroll in primary school, complete and in South and West Asia, less than three quarters of the cohort of girls complete. In no region is there 100% completion by girls at primary school, as envisaged by the MDGs.

Thus in terms of the rather narrow framing of the notion of ‘progress on girls’ education’, that is getting girls into school and ensuring they complete a primary cycle, the MDGs have clearly contributed to a significant expansion, but there is still some distance to go. In addition, there are some important caveats. The figures in tables 1 and 2 are highly aggregated. The excellent performance of some countries masks the dismal progress in others. Within countries there are dramatic variations between enrolment and completion levels in particular regions and for certain social groups. Everywhere it is the poorest, and those who live in the areas most socially distant from centres of power who have the least adequate provision and the most limited opportunities. This is stark with regard to MDG2, but also limits the achievements associated with MDG3 as the gender parity target in secondary and tertiary education has not been met for all socio-economic groups or regions.

TABLE

² Ratio of girls to boys

³ Enrolment of the official age group for primary school expressed as percentage of the children in that age group

In many countries⁴ expansion of enrolments took place at the expense of the quality of the education that was provided. Children attended school where classes were too large for any learning to take place, teachers not well enough trained or supported, and the provision of learning materials grossly inadequate. Many taken for granted gender inequalities and difficulties in working inclusively in schools meant that girls and children from the poorest families often felt these inadequacies in learning provision most sharply. The findings of a number of evaluations of learning outcomes, conducted either by governments or through citizen assessments, have noted that children who attend school have inadequate levels of literacy and numeracy and girls, and children from the poorest quintile achieve the lowest grades. (SACMEQ; Uwezo).

The stress of the MDGs on the expansion of enrolment and completion meant that inadequate attention was given in policy and practice to other key areas of work in education (eg. curriculum, teacher development, complementary programmes) that contribute to progress for girls.

Effective policies, gaps and remaining challenges

The findings from a rigorous review of literature on policies to address girls' education and gender equality recently completed for DFID (Unterhalter et al, 2013 in press) identified four different forms of policy intervention. These focus on

- i) Resource distribution and infrastructure
- ii) Changing institutional cultures with regard to education systems or practice in particular schools
- iii) Challenging discriminatory norms and enhancing practices of inclusion
- iv) Linking girls' schooling to women's empowerment in political, economic, social and cultural relations, particularly reviewing legislation, regulation, and opinion formation.

The study found (Unterhalter et al, 2013 in press page) that there is a greater body of literature evaluating policies that address resource distribution, infrastructure and changing institutional cultures. Much less work has been done to research the effectiveness of policies to change norms and address exclusionary practices in school and related to school. In addition the links of effective policies between girls' schooling and gender equality more widely are under documented.

The study concluded (Unterhalter et al, 2013 page)there is robust evidence from Asia, Africa and Latin America that careful direction of resources to families in need through cash or in-kind transfers to supports girls schooling both in terms of enrolment, attendance and completion. Complementary in kind health interventions can enhance enrolment and lead to learning gains for both boys and girls. The effectiveness of infra-structural interventions, such as school building or sanitation projects, is enhanced when they are linked with processes associated with supporting learning and teaching. In this area of policy there is a good body of knowledge regarding what works, but challenges exist with regard to funding and sustaining the resource distribution and infrastructural projects.

⁴ Detailed studies of this have been made in Malawi, Tanzania, Senegal, Ethiopia, and India

The rigorous review of literature showed (Unterhalter et al, 2013, page)there is evidence from all regions that confirms the importance of having thriving teachers, who are adequately supported to enhance girls' schooling through education, training, reflection on attitudes, and in-service continuing professional development. However there are challenges relating to the levels of pay teachers receive, housing conditions, and training opportunities and support. Education in gender equality is a gap for teachers all over the world. At the level of school systems and particular schools, the study found, gender mainstreaming has been used in education projects in a number of countries, but its effectiveness is often hampered by inadequate resources, lack of attention to local contexts, and very different views on what it entails (Unterhalter and North, 2011). Indeed work on girls' schooling and gender equality is often hampered by difficulties in effectively implementing national policy and translating this down to local levels. Effective interventions to support girls' learning are associated with a 'quality mix', that is a *combination* of a number of different approaches to enhancing quality which include explicit concern with gender equality in teaching, learning and management, attention to curriculum, learning materials and pedagogical practices for schools and classrooms as well as close attention to local context. Support for developing and sustaining this quality to mix is often hard to assemble and sustain.

The study also showed (Unterhalter et al, 2013 in page) there is promising evidence emerging from Asia and Africa with regard to strategies to address inequitable gender norms and practices of exclusion and discrimination. These entail girls participation in clubs, engagement with faith communities to discuss girls' education and gender issues, work with boys on gender equality, and strategies to include marginalized girls and women in decision-making, reflection and action, notably with regard to gender based violence. However, considerable gaps remain in policy and practice on work to address norms which maintain inequalities, and research to investigated effective policies and practices is still needed.

Many works confirm that the introduction of free primary education has expanded opportunities for girls, but free provision generally is for the primary phase. Secondary school is rarely free, but further years in school are shown to be associated with girls being more confident to speak up and claim rights, often more confident to comment on violence against women, and better protected with regard to illnesses like HIV (Unterhalter and Heslop, 2013; Boler and Hargreaves, 2007). Thus an important gap in the MDG framework has been the failure to assure at least nine years of free schooling to all girls.

Remaining challenges are associated with improving distribution of schooling, enhancing quality of learning, ensuring inequitable gender norms, including aspects of violence against women and girls are addressed, and supporting the implementation of the policy that has already been formulated and adopted.

Actions needed to accelerate achievement of the MDG targets on education for girls

While much critical comment has highlighted that the MDG targets on girls' education are too limited, they do constitute a necessary, but not a sufficient starting place. Some key actions needed to accelerate achieving these targets in my view are:

- i) Enough financial and in kind support to allow girls to enrol, attend regularly, and progress through school to complete the last grade of primary school successfully. This entails putting money into public services (schools, roads, health provision)

- ensuring the poorest girls have resources to stay at school, and that **all** teachers are well supported to provide high quality learning.
- ii) Resources (financial, in kind, information and critical engagement with cultures of exclusion) to enable girls to enrol and complete cycles of secondary and tertiary education so that the gender parity target is met in all regions of all countries and for all social groups
 - iii) Rigorous monitoring and evaluation of resources to ensure they are reaching the poorest quintiles and the most excluded communities. Possible county audit 2013 and 2014 to identify where the gaps are and who will fill them.

Dimensions of education to be prioritized in the post-2015 agenda to monitor gender inequalities

In thinking about dimensions of education to be prioritized in the post 2015 agenda, I want to first comment on the recommendations on the table from the UN High Level Panel (HLP) report. The HLP report gives particular attention to gender in that it identifies addressing girls and women as an important aspect of cross cutting concerns with inequalities. It also stresses the need to attend to regional and socio-economic inequities. In outlining illustrative universal goals, with a concern with national targets to be set in key areas it suggests one goal concerned with education and one on empowering girls and women and achieving gender equality. The report outlines indicators concerned with women's rights that were absent from the MDG framework with regard to eliminating violence against women, ending child marriage, ensuring women can own property, engage in financial transactions, and participate in the public sphere politically and economically. It also extends the remit of the education targets associated with the MDGs recommending:

- a. Increasing the proportion of children able to access and complete pre-primary education 2
- b. Ensure every child, regardless of circumstance, completes primary education able to read, write and count well enough to meet minimum learning standards
- c. Ensure every child, regardless of circumstance, has access to lower secondary education and increase the proportion of adolescents who achieve recognised and measurable learning outcomes
- . Increase the number of young and adult women and men with the skills, including technical and vocational, needed for work

In my view, these goals and targets do not go sufficiently to the heart of what needs to be done to address girls' and women's education and advocating for gender equality. The significance of education to the post 2015 framework is signalled by the fact that a good education emerged as the number one priority for the post 2015 world for the nearly 1 million people around the world who voted in the UN/civil society poll regarding the world we want. The HLP goals and targets set the *amount* of education we will assure too low. Lower secondary education is only promised in terms of access, not attendance, completion, or quality. If the indicators for the gender goal on ending violence against women, child marriage and ensuring women's participation in public life are to be supported, the amounts of education assured by the education goal – primary education and access, to lower secondary education, not completion is not enough. Completion of a basic cycle of schooling (between 9 and 12 years depending on the country) seems a minimum to me, with some progressive provision of continuing education for everyone, not just linked to technical and vocational education.

Other gaps;

a) higher and professional education, key to delivering most of the MDGs, enormous expansion of women's participation, and played a significant role in putting women's rights issues on the agenda. Needs some consideration.

b) developing knowledge and understanding of gender equality linked to local contexts and participatory processes

c) adult literacy

d) using the indicator framework and metrics in more participatory ways (Unterhalter, 2013)

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