Viewing Effective Governance and Accountability

THROUGH THE LENS OF SDG 4

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As a bold international framework of unprecedented scale, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is guiding global development efforts to develop sustainable societies. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their targets cover wide-ranging themes encapsulating the development challenges of the 21st century. Beginning with eradicating poverty, and moving to achieving gender equality, providing quality education, combating climate change, and creating peaceful and inclusive societies among others, the SDGs work for a sustainable future that 'leaves no one behind'. Therefore, efforts to achieve the SDGs must involve the widest possible range of stakeholders and countries to work together in reaching the pinnacle of human endeavour.

With regard to education, SDG 4 was formed with the specific aim of ensuring 'inclusive, equitable and quality education for all'. As a means of promoting critical thinking, and converting potential into capacity, education is one of the greatest equalizers of our time. Thus, ensuring 'inclusive and equitable quality education' and promoting 'lifelong opportunities for all' (Goal 4) are among the most critical steps we must take in

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our journey to achieve the SDGs. Globally, the development discourse tends to focus on lifting people out of poverty. But as our work at UNESCO has convinced us, the challenge of lifting people out of illiteracy is just as great, and the rewards of doing so are as enduring.

As one of the signatories of the 2030 Agenda, India committed itself to achieving the 17 SDGs set by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. Realising the importance of education for national development, in 2010, India joined a group of 135 countries to make education a fundamental right for every child. The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 which came into effect on April 2010, guarantees free and compulsory education to children between the age of 6 to 14 years. Along with the RTE Act, government schemes like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme have helped increase access to education in rural and urban India.

The SSA scheme aims to universalise elementary education across states, while the MDM programme helps to achieve increased enrolment in primary schools by also providing improved nutritional status to the enrolled students. As has been corroborated by researchers, the MDM scheme has significantly improved school enrolment rates, created employment opportunities and helped with combating malnutrition (Jayaraman and Simroth 2015). In the field of adult education, India's national Saakshar Bharat Mission – the largest adult education programme in the world – is steadily working towards its goal of helping 80 million Indian adults achieve literacy.

Since access to quality education spurs innovation, boosts employment and helps alleviate poverty, it becomes imperative to address the gaps and challenges hindering the effectiveness of education policy and implementation in India. While India has successfully achieved increased enrolment rates over the past decade as published in the Educational Statistics at a Glance 2018 report (Government of India 2018), providing equitable access to quality education for students from different economic and social backgrounds remains a challenge. Furthermore, how these statistics translate into quality education has come under the scanner because of the slow progress of students in performing on reading,

writing and arithmetic tests (Annual Status of Education Report 2018).

Apart from inter-state disparities in educational achievement, discriminations on the basis of gender, caste and class continue to exist, highlighting the overlapping social and cultural inequalities present across Indian states. The UNESCO 2019 State of the Education Report for India further documented the outstanding progress made in various states, detailed the persisting challenges, and suggested a set of ten recommendations to address them. Therefore, these mutually reinforcing inequalities hinder the cognitive development of children and go against the theme of the SDG 2030 Agenda of 'Leaving no one behind'.

To successfully achieve SDG 4 along with other related SDGs, there is a need to build an education system which addresses these inequalities by ensuring access to quality education regardless of a child's economic status, social identity or any other vulnerability which might restrict access to quality schooling. The role of effective governance and accountability becomes crucial in order to do so. Here, it is worth mentioning the 11 key principles of effective governance endorsed by the UN Economic and Social committee and set by the UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA) and UN DESA (Boukaert et al. 2018). These 11 principles highlight three broad pillars for good governance: effectiveness, accountability and inclusiveness. These principles have been developed to assist countries which volunteer to use these principles in order to help build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. These principles apply to all public institutions including the administrative, executive and legislative organs, the security and justice sectors, independent constitutional bodies and State corporations (Economic and Social Council 2018).

With regard to providing equitable access to quality education for all in India and realizing other important SDG 4 targets, integrating effective governance and increased accountability into the education system helps in encouraging dialogue between the government and its citizens, which strengthens institutional effectiveness and inclusivity (SDG 16). For example, the rights-based approach undertaken by the Indian government towards education through the Right to Education Act

2009, mandates each state to abide by the set of rules mentioned within the Act. This stipulates certain norms and regulations that are protected within the Constitution of the country, making it easy to monitor the learning conditions and hold school authorities accountable in case of any discrepancies. As a result, this process simultaneously increases the accountability of the government system and empowers citizens to hold their state accountable in case their rights get violated.

Integrating effective governance into SDG 4 includes the promotion of sound policy making, monitoring and evaluation systems and regulatory impact analysis (Economic and Social Council 2018). Multi-stakeholder partnerships are equally important in achieving SDG 4, that is, for all ministries, institutions, multilateral and civil society organisations to collaborate and address problems of common interest. Thus, it becomes imperative to integrate effective governance and accountability into the education system in order to move in the right direction and achieve the SDG 4 targets.

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