Annual SDG Week in Curacao

“Skills development as an accelerator for the Curaçao SDG-roadmap”

Education is not only about access to school. It is about setting young people up to life, by giving them opportunities to find decent work, earn a living, contribute to their communities and societies, and fulfil their potential. At a wider level, it is about it is about helping countries nurture the workforce they need to grow in the global economy. The focus of the Education 2030 Agenda more than ever on education quality, learning and skills highlights is exactly about that. It highlights the danger of concentrating on access to education without paying enough attention to whether students are learning and acquiring relevant skills once they are in school.

Skills development at the core of SDG 4 agenda

The essential need for skills development for youth was already recognized in the EFA agenda, more precisely in its third goal, focusing on the ‘learning needs of youth and adults’. It figures even more promptly in the Education-2030 and comes through a number of SDG 4 targets, such as target 4.3 on ensuring equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university; 4.4 on substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship; and on 4.7 on ESD and GCED.

Education 2030 is to be seen within the broader context of development today. Indeed, education systems must be relevant and respond to rapidly changing labour markets, technological advances, urbanization, migration, political instability, environmental degradation, natural hazards and disasters, competition for natural resources, demographic challenges, increasing global unemployment, persistent poverty, widening inequality and expanding threats to peace and safety. All of which are part and embedded in the broader sustainable development agenda.

There is an urgent need for children, youth and adults to develop throughout life the flexible skills and competencies they need to live and work in a more secure, sustainable, interdependent, knowledge-based and technology-driven world. All individuals need to acquire a solid foundation of knowledge, develop creative and critical thinking and collaborative skills, and build curiosity, courage and resilience.

Many young people are still left without skills, including in literacy

Despite, this paramount importance of skills development to achieve not only SDG 4, but also the full SDG agenda, many young people around the world — especially the disadvantaged — are leaving school without the skills they need to thrive in society and find decent jobs Skills development programmes must be improved to boost young people's opportunities for decent jobs and better lives.

There are a number of indicators to measure the extend to which young people and adults are acquiring skills need for decent work as envisaged by the SDG target 4:4. Among these are: the percentage of adults (15 and over) with specific information and communication technology (ICT) skills to copy and paste within a document; to use a formula in a spreadsheet or to write a computer programme.

There is a shortfall of ICT skills. Globally, 4% of adults aged 15 and above can write a computer program using a specialized programming language. The figure is barely higher in the Caribbean as a whole, with 6% of adults being able to do so. In Curacao, the average is the same as the global one. Prior education is a strong predictor of the likelihood that youth and adults have achieved at least a minimum level of proficiency in digital literacy skills. There is also a generational gap as younger adults are at least twice as likely to have basic digital skills as older adults.

Skill development is also about making sure young people and adults have basic literacy and numeracy first place. Overall, universal literacy is already a reality in the broad Latin America and the Caribbean region, with 99% of youth with basic literacy skill on average. The figure for adults is a bit lower even though still high (94%). Disparities in literacy rates are not only generational, they are also drive by other factors.

All too often, access to skills is unequal perpetuating and exacerbating the disadvantage that attends for being poor, female or a member of a social marginalized group. Young people who have grown up in poverty and exclusion are more likely to have little education or have dropped out of school. As result, they have fewer opportunities to develop skills for decent work and hence risk further marginalization in the labour market. These young people not in school need second chance education to acquire the basic literacy and numeracy, which are essential to learn further skills for work. In all this, women and the poor face particular hardship.

Indeed, young people who lack basic literacy and numeracy skills are often working but earning wages below the poverty line in the urban informal sector or farming smallholdings in a context of ever decreasing access to land. Their voices are seldom heard in protests. Providing them with opportunities to escape from low skilled, low paid work should be at the core of every skills development strategy.

Types of skills

When discussing about skills, it is important to understand which skills we are talking about.

There are three main types of skills that all young people need to have – foundation, transferable and TVET skills.

Foundation skills include the literacy and numeracy skills need for getting work that can pay enough for daily needs. These skills are acquired in primary and lower secondary education, and in literacy programmes and adult education. They are prerequisite for continuing in education and training, and for acquiring transferable and technical and vocational that enhance the prospects of getting good jobs.

Transferable or 21th Century skills include the ability to solve problems, communicate ideas and information effectively, be creative, show leadership and conscientiousness and demonstrate entrepreneurship capabilities. People need these skills to be able to adapt to different work environments and so improve their chance to stay of staying in gainful employment.

Employers want the assurances that young people applying for jobs have at least strong foundation skills. They also hope that can deploy their knowledge to solve problems, take the initiative and communicate with team members rather than follow prescribed routines. These 'transferable' skills are not taught from a textbook but can be acquired through good quality education. Yet employers often indicate that these skills are lacking in new recruits to the labour market. Evidence from rich countries shows that staying in school longer helps assure the acquisition of problem-solving skills. For example, in Canada around 45% of those leaving before completing upper secondary lack these skills, compared with 20% who complete the cycle.

Skills learnt at school need to extend beyond subject knowledge. Applying knowledge to real work situations, analysing and solving problems, and communicating effectively with colleagues are all crucial elements of skills development that young people need if they are to obtain good jobs in a global economy increasingly driven by technology. Recognizing this, some countries are striving to incorporate transferable skills into their curricula. Denmark, New Zealand and Hong Kong, all specify problem-solving as a key curriculum feature.

By transferable skills, we also mean to having children, young people and adults learning about issues that pertain to education for sustainable and global citizenship education as foreseen by the SDG target 4.7. Yet, as the five country case studies we have conducted recently have shown, GCED-related content, concepts, values, and competencies remain very loosely integrated across the curriculum. When there are, they are mainly in the formal context. They are less

so in the informal context where the integration is often in the form of extra-curricular activities and featured programs/projects.

Policies on the issue are not readily identified and/or connections are not being made in association with GCED strategies. And there is a knowledge gap in teacher education and training.

Technical and vocational skills: Many jobs require specific know-how from growing vegetables to using a sewing machine, laying bricks, or using a computer. Yet, TVET remains the poor parent of educations systems and suffers from a bad image in many countries. Globally, technical and vocational education and training programmes accounts for only 11% of overall secondary education enrolment.

The percentage is ten percentage points more in the Caribbean region, with indicates the fact that many Caribbean countries have made TVET a priority. This is even so in Curacao and Suriname where TVET programme accounts for 42% of the total secondary school enrolment. This is also the case in Grenada, a country which UNESCO has supported in 2021-22 to develop a nation Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Policy which will be launched early next year.

We are also implementing a SDG Joint UN programme in this country on 'Resilient Caribbean - Engaging & Training Youth, Strengthening Integrated SP Sector Delivery' over the 2022-2024 period. The project focuses on 'Grenadian Youth Empowered for the Digital World of Work'. It aims to equip TVET educators, community youth leaders and post-secondary youths with emerging digital and

entrepreneurial skills required to increase national and regional productivity, and to facilitate youth transition to labour market.

Young people can acquire the three types of skills through formal general education and its extension, technical and vocational education. Alternatively, those who have missed out on formal schooling can benefit from skills training opportunities ranging from a second chance to acquire foundation skills to work-based training, including apprenticeship and farm-based training.

Imperative necessity to invest in skills development

Despite clear evidence of the value to invest in skills development, it still not getting the attention it merits. Where there are still development plans, many are fragmented, poorly coordinated and inadequately aligned with labour market demands and country development priorities. Responsibility for skill development is split between different agencies and accountability is lost.

The lack of strategic planning for skills development, including targets for reaching the disadvantaged shows the short sightedness of many development strategies.

Formal secondary schooling is certainly the most effective way to develop the skills need for work and life. However, alternative approaches to learning skills outside secondary school, such as open and distance learning and community training centres need to be carefully attuned to local labour market needs and backed by long-term financial commitments. Moreover, skills acquired need to be ones that are formally recognized by employers.

Need to promote and practice lifelong learning

I would like to end my presentation by stressing how vital is lifelong learning when it comes to skills development. Lifelong learning is a key principle of SDG 4 and is

at its core. Indeed, all age groups, including adults, should have opportunities to learn and to continue learning for skilling, up and re-skilling.

Beginning at birth, lifelong learning for all, in all settings and at all levels of education, should be embedded in education systems through institutional strategies and policies, adequately resourced programmes, and robust partnerships at the local, regional, national and international levels. This requires the provision of multiple and flexible learning pathways and entry points and re-entry points at all ages and all educational levels, strengthened links between formal and non-formal structures. It also requires recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal education. Finally, lifelong learning also includes equitable and increased access to quality technical and vocational education and training and to higher education and research, with due attention to relevant quality assurance. The concept implies the need to constantly adjust, adapt and our knowledge to new opportunities circumstances and evolving situations, in particular in the context of climate change that require innovation practices to cope with it.

In this connection, I would like to laud the 'Curacao Island of Learning' platform that works to make lifelong learning not only a concept, and approach and perspective, but above all a practice.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR KIND ATTENTION