

## The OECD's contribution on education to the post-2015 framework: PISA for development

### INTRODUCTION

**T**he United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were established in 2000/1 and consist of eight development objectives to be achieved by 2015. It is widely agreed that the MDGs have been effective in mobilising worldwide awareness, leveraging resources, guiding global development efforts and increasing accountability. It is also impressive how close the world will get to most of the MDGs by 2015. However, there is need for a successor framework once the MDGs expire in 2015 to keep the momentum built to date. The OECD played a pivotal role in defining the MDGs. With two years to go, the OECD is increasing its efforts to support the achievement of the MDGs, and at the same time thinking about how it can help the UN in developing a new agenda and framework post-2015. The OECD has a number of areas of expertise which could play an important role in shaping this post-2015 agenda and framework. In the overview brochure for this series, the OECD proposes eleven areas which would be of particular relevance (*Beyond the MDGs: Towards an OECD contribution to the post-2015 agenda*). One of these is to develop a universal measure of educational success – the subject of this brochure.



This brochure provides an overview of progress to date with the education-related MDGs and looks forward to what global education goals might look like beyond 2015. The OECD would like to see education goals and targets included in the post-2015 framework, building on the success of universalising access to and achieving equity in primary schooling and the gains in access and equity at the secondary level that have occurred since the MDGs were launched in 2000. However, experience since 2000 has underlined that schooling doesn't necessarily produce learning. Future education goals should incorporate meaningful and realistic learning objectives. We have also learnt that in order for education to support social, economic and development outcomes in the 21st century, higher levels of learning will be needed – the kind of competencies and higher order thinking skills that are achieved only through quality secondary education.



### Box 1. What is PISA?

First conducted in 2000, PISA provides the most comprehensive and rigorous international assessment of learning outcomes (mathematics, reading and science) in education. This involves testing, every three years, about half a million students aged 15 from around 70 countries, including many middle income and low income countries. Alongside the test itself, PISA collects student, school and system level contextual information, such as parental occupation and education, which allows the factors to be identified that are associated with quality and equity in schooling outcomes.

For more, visit [www.oecd.org/pisa](http://www.oecd.org/pisa)

OECD is well placed to contribute to thinking about future global education goals. In particular, the experience of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) that the OECD has implemented since 2000 in partnership with participating countries is particularly relevant to a focus on learning in the post 2015 framework (Box 1). Shaped by the shared, policy-driven interests of participating countries, PISA provides the most comprehensive and rigorous international

assessment of learning outcomes (mathematics, reading and science) in education. In keeping with these common interests, the scope and nature of the PISA instruments are developed by leading experts in the participating countries. Moreover, part of the value for participating countries in PISA has been shown to lie in the policy insights gleaned from comparative analysis.

OECD will contribute lessons from PISA in respect of how to set and measure realistic learning goals and targets and the likely pace of progress towards achieving these. OECD will also contribute to thinking in relevant fora about future education goals (MDG and the broader Education for All framework) building on countries' experience participating in PISA and its focus on providing comparative data and analysis on policy-making to help build efficient, effective and equitable educational systems and improve learning outcomes for all students.

Planning for the 2015 cycle of PISA is currently underway. Many developing countries that have not participated in previous PISA cycles

**Table 1. The global targets for education in place today**

EDUCATION-RELATED MDGS	EDUCATION FOR ALL GOALS
<b>Goal 2:</b> Ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.	1. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
<b>Goal 3:</b> Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.	2. Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to, and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality (also MDG2).
	3. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes.
	4. Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
	5. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full access to and achievement in basic education of good quality (also MDG3).
	6. Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

**Table 2. Education-related MDGs: 2012 status chart**

	AFRICA			ASIA				OCEANIA	SOUTH AMERICA
	North	Sub-Saharan	East	South-East	South	West	The Caucasus & Central Asia		Latin America & Caribbean
Universal primary schooling	High enrolment	Moderate enrolment	High enrolment	High enrolment	High enrolment	High enrolment	High enrolment	—	High enrolment
Equal girls' enrolment in primary schools	Close to parity	Close to parity	Parity	Parity	Parity	Parity	Parity	Close to parity	Parity

Source: United Nations Statistics, June 2012

### Key:

Target already met or expected to be met by 2015



No progress or deterioration



Progress insufficient to reach the target if prevailing trends persist



Missing or insufficient data



have expressed an interest, following the successful participation of a large number of middle-income countries in previous PISA cycles, including China and India. The positive experiences of Brazil, Peru and Vietnam, for example, demonstrate that developing countries can benefit significantly from participating in PISA. To further support this, the PISA programme is currently undertaking steps to increase the policy relevance of PISA for developing countries. It is hoped that for future cycles, PISA will be able to offer developing countries enhanced policy analysis and insights that are particularly relevant to them and that more countries will be able to participate.

### Global education progress to date

Two MDGs relate specifically to education (Table 1). These two education-related MDGs were drawn from six Education for All (EFA)

goals agreed at the *International Conference on Education for All* held in Dakar, Senegal in 2000. It is important to note that nearly all of the Education for All goals include some consideration of learning and educational quality.

Universal primary education (UPE) remains the most important of the six EFA goals, and is the first of the two education-related goals included among the MDGs. UPE has a much longer history than the other MDGs. Since 1960, the international community, facilitated mainly by UNESCO, has set three successive target dates for achieving UPE. The first target date of 1980 was agreed in the 1960s at four regional conferences. When that target was not reached, the new date of 2000 was agreed by the international community in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. A further postponement to 2015 was agreed in 2000, in Dakar, when UPE

was broadened to Education for All (EFA).

Considerable progress has been made towards the two education-related MDGs since 2000 and the status of these is encouraging (Table 2). In fact, more progress has been made towards these two goals than the other MDGs.

Measuring progress towards the education-related MDGs has focused on country-level reporting with no sub-national breakdowns – countries have been assessed as “on-track” or “off-track” for achieving the goals. However, this approach has not captured the progress that countries have made with increasing enrolment and completion rates, with several developing countries starting from a very low base. Because it is focused on national averages, country level reporting has also masked inequalities and regional disparities within countries, particularly in the larger middle income countries where most of the world’s poor live. While the UPE goal did include a quality indicator (literacy levels for young people aged 15-24), the main source of data is a 10-yearly population census carried out by national governments. In most cases, these are not reliable assessments of literacy among young people – a common test of literacy in these surveys is simply confirmation by household members that they can write their own names. Measuring educational progress beyond 2015 will need to address these issues – particularly for developing countries that may face specific challenges in data collection and have regional disparities and disadvantaged groups.

## What will the post-2015 education goals look like?

### *A focus on the quality of learning*

Despite the gains in enrolment and participation, many young people around the world — especially the disadvantaged — are still leaving school without the knowledge and skills they need to thrive in society and find

decent jobs.<sup>1</sup> UNESCO analysis, based on data from PISA and other international assessments, shows the considerable economic gains to be made by improving student learning. It shows a clear link between learning and the growth of an economy (UNESCO, 2012). A better educated workforce means productivity gains and greater innovation, and these have a strong impact on the future well-being of society. In addition, pressure on aid budgets in donor countries is creating a demand for results in development; in education this means a focus on improving student learning outcomes.

### *A shift of focus towards secondary education*

The EFA movement, led by UNESCO, has made the achievement of universal primary education a long-standing goal and a touchstone for the seriousness of national governments in developing countries. This simple yet daunting goal has proven to be a powerful rallying point for donors, national governments, NGOs and activists. In fact, so powerful has UPE become that it has driven the financing of education in developing countries for the past decade, with shifts of donor and national resources from higher levels of education towards the first years of schooling.

#### **Box 2. PISA's relevance for development**

The 2009 PISA surveyed 74 countries and economies: all the OECD countries plus 40 other countries and economies.

The survey assessed the performance of 15-year-olds, and in addition collected data on parental occupation and education and on selected home characteristics, such as the availability of books. With this information, an index of economic, social and cultural status was constructed. It can be used to identify the relationship between students' performance in school and the disadvantages they face because of their home background.

With UPE now within the grasp of most countries (Table 2), attention is shifting towards

1. According to UNESCO's latest EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2012).



secondary education and ensuring that all students achieve at least a minimum level of learning. There is also a recognition that in order for education to support the achievement of the other MDGs, and a new set of global goals beyond 2015, school leavers will need the kind of competencies and higher order thinking skills that are only achieved at the secondary education level. In many developing countries, the success of UPE is creating increased demand for secondary education and political leaders in these contexts have realised the potential for 'secondary education for all' campaigns.

### What role can the OECD play?

While the importance of primary education, access and equity will be retained, a post 2015 education-related goal is likely to include a stronger focus on learning and incorporate the secondary education level. This kind of goal will present the international community with a major challenge to develop or identify and agree on a universal learning metric. How do we define a learning goal that can be measured and tracked over time? How do we identify and collect the evidence needed to measure progress? What targets can be set to guide progress towards this goal? The OECD is well

placed to contribute to thinking about these challenges.

Major OECD policy instruments, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (see Box 1), have pioneered new and highly collaborative ways in which to measure progress in societies on a global scale.

The OECD has much to share from the lessons from PISA on how to measure learning, the likely pace of progress towards achieving a learning goal and also the importance of avoiding setting over-ambitious learning goals and targets. For example, the ways in which countries have leveraged their PISA results for national policy discussions indicates the likely pace of progress towards achieving a learning goal in OECD countries, middle income countries and developing countries respectively. Understanding these processes will also help to ensure that goals and targets are realistic and achievable.

PISA results have not only identified some of the world's top performing and most equitable education systems, they have also shown that countries from a variety of starting points have managed to raise the quality of educational outcomes substantially. To date 28 low income and middle income countries have participated. Developing countries can benefit significantly from participating in PISA as demonstrated by the positive experiences of Brazil, Peru and Vietnam (Box 2). Planning for the 2015 cycle of PISA is currently underway and an extensive list of countries are being asked to confirm their interest in participating. A large number of these are developing countries that have not participated in previous PISA cycles. To further support this, the PISA programme is currently increasing the policy relevance



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### Box 3. PISA for development

OECD has developed a project for increasing the participation in PISA by developing countries. In summary, the project aims to increase the policy relevance of PISA for developing countries through enhanced PISA survey instruments that are more relevant for the contexts found in developing countries but which produce scores that are on the same scales as the main PISA assessment. The project will also develop an approach and methodology for including out of school children in the surveys. The project's objectives will be achieved over a 36 month period through a three-way partnership involving the OECD, concerned development partners (DAC members plus the World Bank, UNESCO and other UN bodies and other regional organisations) and partner countries from the developing world.

of PISA for developing countries (Box 3). An important strand of this work will explore how to best include out-of-school youth within the assessment process. It is hoped that for future cycles, as a result of the PISA for development project, PISA will be able to offer developing countries enhanced policy analysis and insights that are particularly relevant to them. This should increase the participation of developing countries in PISA.

#### ***Setting the baseline for an education goal***

With increased numbers of developing countries participating in the PISA 2015 cycle this could potentially serve as a baseline for measuring progress by developing countries, including some of the least developed, towards a post-2015 education goal. This could bring some significant advantages:

- A single reference against which to rigorously gauge the degree of progress made towards targets for educational quality and equity.
- A comparable and robust measure of progress to allow all countries – regardless of their starting point – to establish themselves on an improvement trajectory to achieve targets referenced to common international goals.
- Credible and comparable results: PISA requires participating countries to follow common technical, institutional

and administrative standards for the assessment.

- An opportunity to help build institutional capacity. Countries are responsible for overseeing PISA implementation; therefore, participation in PISA can also drive improvements in institutions. This capacity building could be implemented directly with development partners in a way that creates spill-over benefits to other parts of the educational sector.

### Box 4. Building a learning metric

UNESCO has established a Learning Metric Task Force with the support of the Brookings Institute to bring together experts to develop recommendations for the global education and development communities about internationally comparable learning standards, metrics and implementation practices. The task force engages relevant actors at the political and technical levels in a consultative process. The task force will work through till late 2013, feeding into the global policy discourse and processes, particularly related to the post-2015 Education for All and Millennium Development Goals agendas, as well as the United Nations Secretary General's Education First Initiative.

The OECD will contribute experience, evidence, analysis and relevant policy knowledge to the Learning Metric Task Force, the UN's thematic consultations and other relevant fora that are responsible for developing and agreeing post-2015 education goals.

Beyond PISA the OECD provides other comparative data and policy analysis to help build efficient, effective and more equitable educational systems and improve learning outcomes. The OECD's statistics and indicators provide a strong evidence-base for international comparisons of most aspects of education systems. OECD's policy analyses facilitate peer learning across countries as new policy options are explored and experiences compared. Its future-oriented educational research helps shape policy agendas by identifying upcoming issues while drawing upon the overall breadth of the OECD's policy work. The Organisation also provides a forum where governments, business, civil society and academia can share best practices and learn from one another.

In addition, the OECD-hosted Secretariat for the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century (PARIS21) supports developing countries' efforts to develop the statistical capacity necessary, *inter alia*, to monitor progress towards national and international goals. By

supporting the design and implementation of National Strategies for the Development of Statistics (NSDS), PARIS21 plays a key role in helping developing countries mainstream education statistics into the national statistical system, thereby improving the tracking of progress towards a post-2015 global education goal.

To conclude, the OECD will support education-related post-2015 goals that retain a focus on access and equity at primary and secondary education levels, whilst incorporating a meaningful focus on learning. In particular, OECD will engage in the relevant post-2015 forums convened under the UN (Box 4) and contribute to these on the basis of its extensive experience in using evidence emerging from the analysis of PISA data, complemented by insights developed by its experts in policy analysis, implementation and research and innovation, to inform the development of a new generation of global goals and targets in education.

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## Key references and resources

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