



# Summary Report of the eWorkshop on Transforming Education Systems for Sustainable Futures (TESF)

June 2020

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Tuesday, 30 June, 2020

IIHS hosted an e-workshop on *Education and Sustainable Development* on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2020. This was the first in a series of engagement workshops planned for the project - *Transforming Education Systems for Sustainable Futures (TESF)*.

The broad mandate of the TESF network is to focus on research and co-production of knowledges with contribution from a range of academics, practitioners, policy makers and people who live on the margins and have immense potential to contribute to our understanding of how to make our cities and societies sustainable. One of the key questions for the TESF network is: How education itself needs to be transformed for it to play a more meaningful role in building sustainable cities and societies?

A panel of four speakers, namely Prof. N.V. Varghese, Vice-Chancellor NEPA; Prof. Madhulika Banerjee, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi; Prof. Darshini Mahadevia, Ahmedabad University; and Prof. Prasad Shetty, Dean, School of Environment and Architecture, Mumbai were invited to speak on the broad theme of *Education and Sustainable Development*, addressing the following key questions:

- How can education help build knowledges, capacities and agency to achieve sustainable development?
- How do we address education inequality and questions of gender, social, economic and environmental justice?

The context was laid out by three introductory speakers: Aromar Revi spoke on the *SDGs and India's Development*; Poonam Batra spoke on *Education in India and the Challenge of Sustainable Development*. Professor Leon Tikly introduced the TESF project as a network of people across several countries committed to high quality interdisciplinary research in the areas of education and sustainable development.

Aromar Revi gave a brief introduction to the fifty year history of the evolving discourse of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and India's involvement in foregrounding concerns of poverty, development and the environment. It was pointed out that one of the criticisms of SDGs is its complexity with 17 goals and 169 targets. This was attributed to the intensity of the negotiations amongst UN member countries who came to the table with their unique concerns and agendas. Drawing attention to the seven targets and three means of implementation of SDG 4 of Quality Education, it was argued that all the SDGs are deeply interlinked. The presentation posed the critical question of how TESF could contextualise the role of SDGs in locating the transformational role of education in sustainable development; and how education in this transformational role can impact the other SDGs.

While the SDGs need to be looked at critically, especially from the point of view of those working on the ground, he argued that they hold relevance as they give a set of shared agendas for very diverse set of countries to agree upon and work together with. Nevertheless, the SDGs have highlighted the multi-dimensional nature of sustainable development that makes all countries developing countries. The commitment to leave no one, no place and no ecosystem

behind creates the space to address inequality and justice. It was urged that the current discussion be seen in relation to the crisis of COVID-19 as this maybe the biggest crisis the world has seen since World War II as it threatens to reverse many of the gains made so far.

Laying out the educational context of contemporary India, Poonam Batra argued how thirty years of reforms have been driven by a donor-led international discourse and interests of private players. Ideological contests in curriculum and pedagogy and the increasing privatisation of both school and higher education add to the complexity of challenges in an iniquitous society. The inability to break the link between quality and privilege established since colonial times, and the persistent challenges of rooting quality education in frames of equity and social justice have deepened the learning crisis. Ideas of segregated school and higher education systems contained in National Education Policy (NEP) of 2019 are likely to cement prevailing educational inequalities. The recent COVID-19 driven push for digital learning could create new forms of exclusion and passive citizens, complicating the task of developing a critical citizenry that can innovate and apply knowledges to enable a sustainable future.

SDG goal 4 on quality education promises to enable upward mobility to escape poverty and reduce gender, social and economic inequalities. Educational inequality however, has exacerbated social, economic, gender and regional inequalities and will therefore need to be seen as the centre of the sustainable development debate. It is therefore critical to explore and understand what is meant by quality education; to examine how educational equality impedes the realisation of the full potential of education in enabling socially and environmentally sustainable societies; and to imagine how higher and professional education can be transformed to develop critical knowledges, capacities and agency towards developing a socially and environmentally just society.

Professor Leon Tikly, Principal Investigator of the TESF project introduced it as a Network plus endeavour that aims to co-produce high quality southern-led researches. He emphasised the centrality of education in achieving other SDGs; and the need to transform education to become a driver for sustainable development. This can only happen if the voices of the most marginalised, practitioners and researchers are included and heard.

TESF is an expanding network of researchers funded by the UK Global Challenges Research Fund at £4.75 million for three years between November 2019 and April 2023. The network has partners in the UK, India, South Africa, Rwanda, Somalia and the Netherlands. A substantial part of the project funds is planned to be used to support over eighty 'Plus funded' projects led by southern based researchers. Through the work of the TESF hubs, the aim is to mobilise the capacity to co-produce new knowledge about how education can contribute to the development of people's agency in achieving sustainable livelihoods; development of sustainable cities and communities; and taking appropriate action to address climate change. The role of education is particularly critical in mobilising capacities at different scales for sustainable cities and climate action. TESF aims to look at formal, indigenous and local knowledges to transform education to enable sustainable development.

### **Panellists**

Prof. N.V. Varghese foregrounded progressive universalisms as a principle to address 'durable inequalities' created by educational systems. In his view, education plays a critical intermediary role in facilitating interlinkages between the various sustainable development goals and targets. The time when the SDGs were being formulated in the mid-2010s, was a

time marked by rise in ‘authoritarian nationalism’ with a world-wide inclination to go against multilateral cooperation. However, if we would like to achieve goals set by the SDG frame, it is critical to foreground the role of democracy and human rights.

Over the years market-led reforms have deepened inequalities in both school and higher education. Not only have regional and social inequalities remained, but rural-urban divide has increased. Higher education enrolments have substantially increased in private institutions and differences in enrolments among the lowest quartile have become more pronounced. Income inequalities also show a phenomenal rise. The questions before us are: What measures can be put in place to overcome inequalities in education? If progressive universalism is to be the principle to achieve SDG targets, we need to focus on the public education system. How do we improve the image of and build confidence in the public education system?

The next speakers were Professor Madhulika Bannerjee and Professor Darshini Mahadevia. Professor Madhulika Banerjee laid strong emphasis on indigenous knowledges and talked about the gap education has created between the knowledges of the head and the hand, linked to a deep theory-practice gap. She brought to the fore the hegemony of particular knowledges over other diverse knowledges and suggested looking at the role of policy in strengthening hegemonic structures and subjugated knowledges. Professor Darshini Mahadevia taking the discussion forward, foregrounded the importance of interdisciplinarity to articulate the link between problematising and problem solving and addressing this theory-practice divide.

Professor Prasad Shetty brought to the fore the problematic nature of the regulatory framework that governs private colleges. Local languages and local concerns often do not fit in this frame, as a result of which ‘gate keeping institutions’ determine the legitimacy of the degrees offered. Using the example of an innovative course taught in the institute on ‘repair and retrofit’, he explained how knowledge that is both practical and in demand gets marginalised via standards and norms imposed by policy and state regulatory mechanisms. The example created an opening to think about the nature of knowledges and the need to identify subjugated and local knowledges. His presentation also foregrounded the role policy and the legal system plays in delinking the universal from the particular in terms of knowledges.

### **Key Discussion Points**

Discussions foregrounded the idea that sustainability is a systemic challenge and is interlinked, cutting across various sectors. The question of knowledge thus becomes central to the understanding these interlinkages. It is therefore critical that epistemic frames within which much of education rests will need to be revisited and re-examined.

Discussions led to questioning the SDG frame itself. For instance, how do we conceptualise the various trade-offs and contradictions between different development goals themselves? This led to the issue of globalisation and its troubled differences with the local. It was emphasised by more than one speaker that we need to go local to address the global challenges, but it is still unclear what relationship the global shares with the local in the current global context. In what ways do the law and policy delink the global from the local; the universal from the particular? This connects with the contention that we need to examine how exclusion continues despite attempts to create inclusive structural practices of access and learning.

It is also important to think through the question of scale in the context of universality. For the transformatory potential of education to be unlocked we need multilevel and multi-scalar

interventions. In what ways does universality impede this process especially through the regulatory frameworks of the state? How can universality be used to add to these linkages?

The question of inequality and social justice emerged as a key concern in realising the goals of quality education. There was a general understanding that we need to understand the systemic nature of inequalities. The complex relationship between inclusion and exclusion needs to be understood in relation to established institutional capacities and local practices.

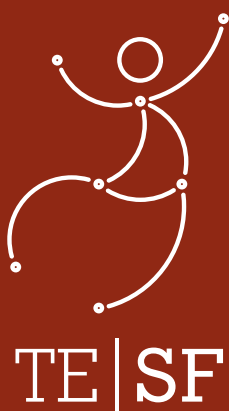
The importance of public education was emphasised and the challenges posed by privatisation highlighted. A better understanding of what role education can play in shaping our public sphere needs to be investigated.

It is important to deepen our understanding of the linkage between employment and education, especially because the pressure on employability is expected to increase with job-loss growth.

If critical thinking is a crucial link between knowledge and action, we would need to reimagine education to bridge the gap between head, heart and the hand; theory and practice; knowledge and action. How can education help imagine more local and contextual linkages between theory and community practices?

Concerns over the current COVID-19 crisis were shared by everyone and it was considered important that work on how education can respond to this challenge.

The question of how education should engage with social realities was raised. The binary of researcher and practitioner was also problematised and emphasis was laid on how framing the right questions is part of the solution. One critical question is: why education has not become a tool for resistance for the marginalised?



TESF is a GCRF funded Network Plus, co-ordinated out of the University of Bristol, working with partners in India, Rwanda, Somalia/Somaliland, South Africa the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

We undertake collaborative research to Transform Education for Sustainable Futures.

TESF partner institutions are:

Indian Institute for Human Settlements  
Rhodes University  
Transparency Solutions  
University of Bristol  
University of Nottingham  
University of Rwanda  
Wageningen University

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