



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

July 2020

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Friday, 10 July 2020

IIHS hosted the second e-workshop on *Transforming Educational Systems for Social and Environmental Justice* on 10th July 2020. It was part of 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 how education can address the issues of climate change, develop sustainable cities, and the skills and agency of individuals that bring about sustainable livelihoods. The project will bring together knowledge co-produced by a range of academics, practitioners, policymakers, and historically marginalized groups.

A panel of three speakers, namely Sumit Bose, Former Secretary, School Education and Literacy, MHRD; Professor Geetha Nambissan, Former Professor, ZHCES, Jawaharlal Nehru University; Pratim Roy, Director, Keystone Foundation, Kotagiri were brought together to address the following questions:

How can we transform India's education system to address sustainable development?

How can education help build relevant knowledge, capacities, and agency to develop sustainable cities and communities and accelerate climate action?

The context was laid out by three introductory speakers: Poonam Batra spoke on *Transforming Educational Systems for Social and Environmental Justice*. Aromar Revi spoke on *Education for Sustainable Urbanisation*; Amir Bazaz spoke on *Education for Climate Change*.

Professor Poonam Batra introduced the relationship between education, social justice, and inequality to set the context. Highlighting specific changes in the quality debate, she stated that outcome-based notions of quality (depicted through assessment-based learning) have replaced discussions and affirmations of diversity and complexity of Indian classrooms and the problem of teacher preparedness. Drawing on the example of poor institutional support and amendments to the Right to Education Act (RTE), it was argued how the right to education is reduced to a mere right to learning, ignoring the context, larger goals, and the purpose of education. In addition, the current status of the RTE Act is in line with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020's idea of a minimalist notion of quality which is likely to make the Act defunct. Critiquing the current education system and discourse, Professor Batra labelled the issue as a 'Neoliberal-cultural nationalist' problematique that promotes ideals of cultural nationalism framed within the neoliberal agenda of outcome-based education. The policy recommendation to make RTE less restrictive suggests that it would result in ideologically driven schools and profit-driven education enterprises. The policy takes the position that children and their backgrounds are responsible for the learning crisis, while dismissing how structural inequalities, resulting from teacher vacancies, unqualified teachers, and infrastructural inadequacies, contribute to the problem.

Professor Batra highlighted how large number of teacher vacancies, decline in resource and budget allocations for education would be critical challenges to the project of transforming education systems. In addition, the role of teachers in implementing a minimalist agenda, the

homogenization, and standardisation of teacher education curricula also impacts the ability to address concerns of sustainable development. It was urged that if the state merely works as a 'regulator' of an education system dominated by private providers, the state agenda of transforming education for sustainable futures is likely to be derailed. It is important therefore to strengthen the role of public institutions to address inequality, develop a regulatory framework within RTE norms for private schools, strengthen the federal structure and centre-state coordination, and envision a curriculum rooted in equality, social and gender justice.

The universal and inclusive features of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly in relation to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and how the knowledge and understanding of SDG 11 can contribute to the discourse on education was the theme of the next panellist, Aromar Revi. While discussing the ongoing struggle to include urban spaces in SDGs 11, Aromar Revi highlighted that the core challenge for the SDGs was the battle of localization as SDGs stemmed from international agreements and do not necessarily translate to the ground as envisaged. The localization of SDGs was illustrated through one of IIHS's flagship projects in Tamil Nadu: 'Tamil Nadu Urban Sanitation Support Program' (TNUSSP) which not only addressed issues of water shortage in the state but also attempted to reduce the environmental hazard of waste being dumped into water bodies. The program enabled gender equality and inclusion of sanitation workers within the wider community and helped promote WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) awareness in schools. As TNUSSP brings together different SDGs related to clean water, good health, and sustainable cities, an integrated approach to localizing SDGs was emphasized. This approach of SDGs has global implications in terms of creating new jobs, sustainable housing, water supply, transportation, and agriculture. Aromar stated that the key challenge is the lack of people who understand how to implement these goals and bring these pieces of knowledge together. He illustrated how the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on sustainable cities of IIHS was an example of taking the learnings from sustainable cities and bringing it into an educational environment. In terms of structural responses to transform the education system, he laid out the various challenges of Indian urbanisation that constitute addressing questions of poverty, issues of rural to urban migration, and climate change. He stressed the role of IIHS which is en route to establishing itself as a national university that will contribute to knowledge creation, and develop a new generation of interdisciplinary scholars and practitioners. Establishing itself as a research-based university IIHS could bridge the quality, inclusion, and scale chasm that other institutions are failing to address.

Amir Bazaz, the next speaker, engaged with the idea of 'Education for Climate Action' and pointed out the following challenges concerning this initiative: the nature of canonical disciplines that create a chasm between theory and praxis, shift from criticality to proposition, and agency in pedagogical and knowledge creation processes. The need for creating arenas of engagement that would enable the aggregation of local action with regional/national/global processes was highlighted. Drawing on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2018 report regarding global warming, Amir explained if education was to address climate action, it would need to establish a connection between sustainable development and climate adaptation. Mitigation through system transitions such as energy, urban, infrastructure, land, ocean, and ecosystem are important. As problems of climate do not exist in isolation and are closely related to other SDGs such as poverty and sustainable cities, we need to unpack multi-layered linkages between inequality, vulnerability, exposure, and climate risks with an emphasis on systems perspective to bring about change. The role of education in climate action should also account for and be responsive to the multidimensional vulnerability individuals deal with within society. Touching upon ongoing educational initiatives to build institutional

capacities in relation to climate action, Amir cited the IIHS's Urban Fellow Programme and MOOCs for professionals and students as examples that would bring a multidisciplinary approach to education for climate action. As exemplified, education for climate action needs to explore the synergetic space that would bring together individual capacities, institutions, and actors to respond to development challenges which are supported by various enabling factors and pedagogical frameworks that are constructed by evidence-based research. Amir concluded with some questions for consideration in the context of 'Education for Climate Action' such as the role of professional programmes in addressing challenges of environmental and social justice, how disciplinary knowledge can contribute to challenges of sustainability, and how indigenous knowledge can interrogate sustainable development, particularly in the context of climate change.

Panellists

The first speaker on the panel was Sumit Bose who began by highlighting the fragility of the Indian education system. Sumit Bose discussed how 50,000 school children from grades 1 to 8 remained out of school in the Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh. Drawing from this example, he highlighted the fragility of the Indian primary education system despite progress being made in other aspects and contexts. The need to build strong foundations in primary education and to ensure that no child gets left behind as that will serve as the base for the growth of higher education was stressed upon.

Citing the pandemic, Sumit Bose mentioned that several children do not have access to digital education. Pointing out disparate growth and exacerbated inequality, he elaborated how certain peripheral and marginal spaces get left out in different development projects, and this was evident in education too. In relation to, the 'no one is left behind' principle of the SDGs, Sumit stated that it was important to focus on areas where children were likely to be left behind; areas that were marked with unsustainable agriculture, fragile environment systems, poor communities, and so on. This would have clear implications for climate change, agriculture, and sustainability. In continuity with the important issue of strengthening our federal structure, raised earlier, he suggested that local governments should be strengthened to effectively deal with the problems of urbanisation.

Professor Geetha Nambissan focussed on the need to strengthen the 'public' in education, its proactive advocacy, and research both in publicly funded and private education in order to transform education for sustainable development. Pointing out how the SDGs gave space to private actors, the role of private players in providing schooling for the poor in the last decade was highlighted. The dominant business models of low-cost education provided by private players use technology for cost-cutting purposes and claim to increase access and provide high-quality private education for children from poor and low-income families. This technology-driven model is viewed as a high-profit market and is visible through the presence of numerous start-ups and was legitimized and promoted as an innovative and equitable model. This model was normalized in policy due to the advocacy and business interests of large corporations and international foundations such as World Bank, Google, and DFID to name a few. Such organisations played a role in shaping global education policy as well as at the national level, as it was clear from the privatization of national policy. With their increasing role, it becomes important to ask questions of equity and the right to education.

Professor Nambissan mentioned how the discourse around low-cost learning and the conceived notion of education for the poor promoted Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in government schools. PPP organisations such as Teach for India (TFI) and STIR are established as key pathways to achieving SDGs and are projected as reform models for non-performing or under-performing government schools. This necessitates proper public scrutiny and independent evaluations. Besides PPPs, Professor Nambissan pointed out the need to pay attention to the hollowing out of the already neglected government schooling by private advocacy and practices and the complicity of the state that had failed to put in place regulatory mechanisms to check whether these partnerships are even competent to bring in reform. The larger question of demographic and critical citizenship, understanding and sensitivity towards social and cultural diversity, and care for the planet required us to consider education as a public good, not a private, singular, individualized entity; the latter seems to have gained popularity in the recent past. It was argued that the publicly-funded system of education can be strengthened, made equitable, and inclusive by engaging with teacher education, explore the knowledge that is required to understand complex inequalities, issues of diversity, equality, and sensitivity. Professor Nambissan stated that private enterprises could contribute to this, but that required proper engagement, monitoring, and regulations. It was stressed that there is need for a network of researchers to explore these questions in a complex society such as India. Education must be viewed holistically and be a source of support for all children in times of crisis.

Pratim Roy, the last panellist, shared his experiences of working for the past 27 years, with indigenous and marginalized communities in Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu. Based on his initial experience of working on the connections between economics, ecology, and biodiversity in the context of beekeepers and honey collectors of Tamil Nadu, Pratim Roy stated that they now focus on conservation, livelihood, governance in an integrated manner. He shared his insights for an education system from a practitioner's point of view and as an example, focused on their collaboration with Cornell University for the past 10 years. They incorporated and converted their fieldwork into a curriculum, with teachers being the workers in the organisation. The course brought together students from the Nilgiris Field Working Centre and about five-six Cornell undergraduates to learn and engage with each other. Pratim emphasised that the curriculum was curated to look at the biosphere reserve of Nilgiris (wetlands, wildlife, shelter, and food gathering techniques). The first phase of the course entailed theory and classroom work, complimented with the second phase of students working on specific projects related to water, agriculture, or wildlife in the villages. It was a life-changing experience for both Cornell students as well as the Adivasi youth. Subsequently, the latter either took on academic pursuits or joined existing other organisations. Based on this education-based initiative, Pratim offered three recommendations and suggestions concerning education: the need to go as local as possible, take on a multi and inter-disciplinary approach in education and acknowledge the role of the government in the education sector.

Key Discussions Points

Discussions revolved around the importance of exploring how research can contribute to shifting or countering some of the ideological trends concerning the role of private players in public education. Particularly, it was suggested that academics and researchers need to critique the research which claims that low-cost private schools do far better than government schools. The narrative that emerges from the research pushed by global corporate houses and their foundations need to be examined critically. It was reiterated that it is important to critically examine how some research projects are used to push certain agendas selectively.

It was highlighted that exploring new methodologies to study networks such as the functioning of the Global Education Summit that had several meetings and activities through which plans and policies are formulated is critical. In terms of the nature of research, the need to bring in the voices of those individuals whose lives and futures are at stake was stressed upon. Research projects envisaged under this umbrella need a more diverse voice particularly from those groups of people who are likely to be affected by unsustainable policies in education and development.

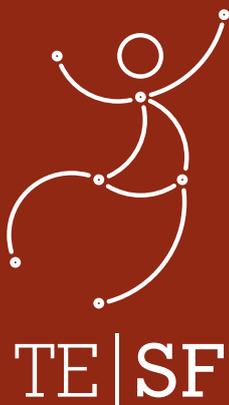
The debate between the role of research in higher education and think tanks for policymakers and the government also emerged. In questioning what was driving policymakers concerning transformation, the focus should be on the quality of the research carried out by HEI (Higher Education Institutions) and think tanks. Policymakers across different levels within the government should be able to access the research that is relevant for them.

The role of private players in the education domain particularly concerning teacher education and setting up low-fee paying private schools was discussed. The bulk of teachers graduating from private institutes are failing to qualify the Teacher Eligibility Test (TET), indicating the poor quality of teacher preparation. Teachers' poor learning and preparation impacts children's learning. It was highlighted that teachers are not equipped to handle diverse classrooms and the challenges that these classrooms pose. In addition, the concentration of these private institutes in urban areas also means it is difficult for members from marginalized communities (SCs/STs) to join the teaching profession. The fragility of low fee-paying private schools came to the forefront during the pandemic when the economy came to a halt; parents could not pay fees which resulted in children being pulled out of these schools and several schools closing down. The pandemic exposed the unsustainable and fragile nature of the private system of schooling.

The scalability of alternative education projects such as those in Kotagiri was discussed. While one of the suggestions was to bring in a larger audience to such projects through the internet, such virtual platforms have their constraints. For instance, experiences and issues faced during fieldwork cannot be replicated. While there are challenges in scaling projects, it was important to scale up projects from an institutional perspective. Another suggestion for the scalability of alternative models was to adapt such models to the local context and then scale up, instead of just replicating them in different contexts.

The criticality of space for localized and indigenous knowledge to enter mainstream curriculum was also emphasised. In terms of taking education to the masses, especially in the given pandemic situation, the role of the internet as a medium to provide education was mentioned. However, internet connectivity, the ownership of smartphones and computers continue to pose major challenges.

In terms of the role of education in achieving the SDGs in relation to sustainable cities and climate change, it was reiterated that the focus of transformation of education need to be at all levels of the education system - from school education, curriculum, teacher education, higher education, and professional education. It is important to look across the span of education systems keeping in mind the goals of equity, inclusiveness, and sustainability. Also, the intersectionality and the role of caste, gender, and class in transforming education systems need to be explored.



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
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