India Briefing Note

Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures

Education in India: thirty years of attempted reform

Led by the Constitutional frame of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity, early post-Independence India laid emphasis on the development of a strong public education system (GoI, 1966).

This however, failed to translate into concerted policy on mass education as evident in India's first education policy (GoI, 1968). Belated efforts to universalise basic education were made only in the mid-1990s (The first nation-wide programme on universal primary education was initiated post-Jomtein Conference on 'Education for All' in 1990). This was amidst high regional, social and gender disparities, low public investment in education, and poor institutional capacity in the school education system, particularly in teacher preparation. Post-liberalisation education policy and practice in India has been increasingly influenced by a donor-led international discourse, and the interests of private players (Batra, 2012; Kumar, et. al., 2001). More

recently, persistent ideological contests in areas of curriculum and pedagogy pose new and difficult challenges in an already iniquitous society. Much of this is disconnected from the global discourse on sustainable development.

Despite developing a progressive school and teacher education curricular discourse (NCERT, 2005; NCTE, 2009) and the passing of the Right to Free and Compulsory education (GoI, 2009) Act, the Indian state school system is still unable to offer quality teaching and learning to most children. As a result, enrolments in state schools have declined while those in unregulated private schools have mushroomed across some of India's most educationally challenged states (The largest number of private schools is at the elementary and secondary level in the states of UP, Maharashtra, followed by Gujarat and West Bengal. Currently, India is one of the four South Asian countries where about one-third of children from 6 to 18 years of age attend private schools (World Bank, 2017)). Learning levels continue to stagnate across several states (ASER, 2019). Increasing commercialization of the teacher education system has led to its virtual

capture by private players. While close to 80 percent of children study in state schools, over 90 percent of teacher education institutes are in private hands (GoI, 2012). Outsourcing of in-service training of teachers to private agencies, is building with the growing influence of philanthropic institutions in central and state government policy.

Over the last two decades, India's higher education system has expanded rapidly bringing large numbers of first-generation learners into universities and colleges, posing a new set of challenges to when this system was first built over the 1950s to the 1970s. While public universities face major financial and human resource constraints, much of the recent expansion of professional and higher education has been led by private players, with reports of a strong decline in their employability (Kapur and Mehta, 2017). Mal-regulation, especially of professional and teacher education, has deepened many of these challenges and limited innovation in teaching, research and application to addressing the everyday problems of sustainable development.

Multiple attempts at systemic reform of the school and higher education system to address these interlinked challenges have (except for some states) largely failed to institutionalise universal quality education and address the growing learning crisis. A differentiated multi-tiered school and higher education system has helped cement the educational inequality that India' public education system was envisioned to address. This has further exacerbated existing socio-economic, gender and regional inequalities. If this persists, India's demographic dividend propelled by 365 million young people 15 to 30 years old (UN, 2019) could well turn into a nightmare (Reddy, 2006).

Sustainable Development in India

India was an early contributor to the global environment and development debate (UN, 1973), the initial framing of sustainable development (Brundtland et al., 1987), its articulation around unfulfilled global environmental conventions (including the climate change) (UN, 1992) to its reincarnation in the 2030 Development Agenda, the SDGs (UN, 2015) and the Paris Climate agreement (UNFCCC, 2015). It was one of the first countries to recognize the importance of balancing economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development (Niti Aayog, 2019).

Much of this has been confined to the realm of environmental policy and commitments, with growing environmental degradation of land, aquatic and marine ecosystems; a sharp increase in extreme events and climate impact; serious surface and groundwater challenges; growing GHG emissions from a low per capita base; multiple serious industrial accidents; amongst the worst urban air pollution in the world and the collapse of a range of ecosystem and agriculture-based livelihoods, putting hundreds of millions of poor and vulnerable populations at high risk.

Significant progress has been made in addressing extreme poverty, improving access to food security and expanding the supply of affordable clean energy in India, with wide regional variations. Yet, overall sustainable development outcomes have been poor on good health and well-being, reducing inequality, gender equality,

infrastructure and decent work compared to many other low-middle income countries, including in South Asia (Revi et al, 2019). India has developed relatively strong institutions, governance frame and fiscal space driven by a decade long growth spurt, which are currently under pressure, limiting the momentum to deliver the SDGs to all people and places by 2030.

The linkage between India's colonial legacy and 'modernist' educational system and the everyday challenges of delivering development outcomes is fragmented at best, or at worst marginal to most public and mainstream institutions (Kapur & Mehta, 2017). This is partially due to institutional inertia, but also the fragmentation of practice from theory building and strong disciplinary silos that limit transgression and engagement with proposition and building teacher and learner agency (IIHS, 2013; Batra, 2005).

Education for Sustainable Development

Education for sustainable development in India, needs to address three simultaneous processes. First, meeting the goal of universal access to quality education. Second, addressing deep inequality in the education system, without which quality education will continue to be a distant possibility. Third, linking the content, goals and practices of quality education and lifelong learning with other sustainability concerns: addressing poverty, gender and economic inequality, decent livelihoods, sustainable cities and communities and climate action.

Key Research Questions

Critical and propositional responses to this lie in examining:

(a) major conceptual shifts in the meanings and purposes of education and what is meant by quality education;

(b) the ways in which educational inequality impedes the realization of the full potential of education in enabling socially and environmentally sustainable societies;

(c) how linkages between school and higher education and economic, social and

environmental sustainability can be forged; and

(d) how higher and professional education can be transformed to develop critical knowledges, capacities and agency towards developing a socially and environmentally just society.

Education for Sustainable Cities & Communities

Sustainable cities and communities occupies a pan-SDG space i.e. the spatialization or territorialisation of sustainable development to give life to the 2030 agenda commitment to address inequality by 'leaving no person, no place and no ecosystem behind' and the Paris Climate Agreement (Rudd et. al., 2018; de Coninck et al., 2018, Revi, 2016, Revi & Rosenzweig, 2013). Education for sustainable cities (the third of India living in urban areas) and communities (the two-third currently living in rural areas) will need to explore the relevant knowledges, capacities and agency necessary to support the largest prospective urbanisation in history, as India's population approaches 1.5 billion and link that to critical interdisciplinary education in India's professional and higher education system (Pieterse and Revi, 2013).

Education for Climate Action

Education for Climate Action in India needs to build the connection between sustainable development and climate adaptation and mitigation via four systems transitions: energy; industrial; urban and infrastructure; and land, ocean and ecosystems, and (IPCC, 2018, Revi, 2008). It could do this by establishing linkages between the Paris Climate Agreement and potential 1.5C pathways and the SDGs, particularly with poverty reduction (SDG 1), decent work and livelihood creation (SDG 8), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), infrastructure and environmental conservation (SDGs 14 & 15) (Revi, 2016). Inequality in India is closely linked to exposure and vulnerability to climate risks and hence the nexus between adaptation and everyday development action, needs to be critically examined.

Key Research Questions

Three sets of questions need to be addressed across both the Sustainable Cities and Climate Action themes:

(a) how professional education programmes could address challenges of environmental conservation and justice (e.g. ecological degradation, displacement, climate adaptation esp. for those living on the margins) and those of social justice (e.g. gender, social inequity based on religion, caste, language, region, and urban poverty);

(b) How can specific disciplinary knowledges contribute to address the challenges of sustainability? Could these be linked to specific challenges faced by the marginalised and problematized using interdisciplinary perspectives?

(c) How could indigenous knowledge systems help interrogate and problematize sustainable development, in this context?

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