

PUBLISHING

SOCIAL PROBLEMS AS FRAMEWORK: BETWEEN THE NAIVE DO-GOODISM AND THE FACTUAL REALISM OF DECLARATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL FORUMS

With the slogan “Time for action”, the agreement on the Climate Change Summit COP25 recently held in Madrid has concluded leaving a general feeling of scepticism and disappointment, but also with a growing perception that the discourse based on social criticism and position-taking towards challenges and threats facing mankind must transcend the great declarations of international political dialogues, the pages of essays and university walls, traditional stronghold of intellectuals and thinkers, to be placed down the streets, on the media, among citizens and new social movements.

Both the intellectual critical analysis and social activism are only some of the expressions of a disenchanted society, disappointed with the political inaction that faces economic interests of global powers. There is plenty of evidence of a range of social initiatives which show an increasingly active society organised around groups and associations often involving intellectuals, writers, social activists and citizens in general. The British documentary entitled “*The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*”, based on the book of Naomi Klein, known for her criticism of neo-liberal capitalism, globalization and militarism, is an example of the so-called theory of “shock doctrine”, which represents an apocalyptic and dystopian overview showing natural disasters, the horrors of wars and, in essence, the consequences of the excesses of capitalism. Another example could be publications such as *Truthout* in United States which engage in a reflexive and demanding journalism, a form of popular journalism which

promotes social criticism and is considered as an alternative to official media. Several of the articles published are signed by prestigious intellectuals as Henry Giroux or Peter McLaren. Moreover, there are many examples which we might sum up as alter-activism¹. Yet, regardless of the role of new social movements, the truth is that most of the political and ideological clout affecting the change and/or search for social problems still remains in the guidelines marked by international forums and meetings.

Meetings, Declarations...

The great international political forums and meetings have the goal to analyse and guide specific programmatic actions to solve global problems; it is, however, easy to observe their inefficiency in many of the cases. Specifically regarding education, and without being exhaustive, a basic chronology of some of these international summits developed since the turn of millenium, where experts, educators, politicians, institutions and government, civic and social organizations all around the world are gathered, enables the appreciation and identification of the main issues facing global society nowadays. Domestic violence, sexual violence, juvenile delinquency, child abandonment and abuse, the loss of civic values, social inclusion (migrants, disabled, women, elders), labour oppression and exploitation in some parts of the world, unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, the digital gap, the impact of

globalization on the poorest and most vulnerable countries and social sectors, new and old addictions, climate change and ongoing environmental degradation, the increasing global inequity regarding income distribution, global issues as the control of sexually transmitted diseases (HIV/AIDS), famine, illiteracy, street children, child labour, gender perspective, indigenous groups, North-South cooperation, the lack of community involvement... are just a few of the social problems continuously highlighted in many of these international conferences on education.

Some of these issues are long-standing while others are a consequence of our own development through time. In any case, it is interesting to analyze the extent to which these problems are identified and to assess how international efforts strive to deal with them from different strategies, using education as key resource. Given the multitude of conferences and government meetings, we will tackle in this text, as a demonstrative exercise, the three great international forums promoted by UNESCO and UN: the initiative Education For All (EFA), World Education Forum and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

In April 2000 the World Education Forum, coordinated by UNESCO, took place in Dakar² (Senegal) under the auspices of four international bodies: the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), UNICEF and the World Bank. This forum confirmed the World Declaration on Education For All, adopted ten years earlier in Jomtien (Thailand). The World Education Forum in Dakar focused on some of the problems listed above, and laid on education the responsibility of being a cornerstone of democratic and civic principles all around the world, besides highlighting equitable distribution of knowledge, science and technology, reaffirming the motto of enhancing quality and equity of education for all that was expressed in Jomtien³ in 1990. In the Forum conducted in Dakar the Framework for Action, *Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments* was drafted and submitted, and included six broad-spectrum goals of EFA⁴. The targets proposed in Dakar were planned for the next 15 years (2000-2015) and set the agenda and the efforts of governments and citizens in a significant number of emerging countries in the world.

In September 2000 the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted in New York. The so-called Millennium Declaration raised 8 major commitments; two of them referred explicitly to education (the second goal on achieving universal primary education and the third on promoting gender equality and empowering women), the

rest presented an obvious link to preventive socio-educative initiatives⁵.

A relevant qualitative leap forward in this process was the definition of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which implies the involvement of key elements of sustainable development in the process of education and learning; for instance, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biological diversity, poverty alleviation and sustainable consumption. For that purpose, we should start in the comprehensive educational action to promote the development of attitudes, knowledge, values and competences for the sake of sustainable development in the world population. In this sense, World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) was held in Nagoya (Japan) from 12 to 14 November 2014, which evaluated the achievements made so far and prepared the agenda to lend continuity beyond 2015 to the agreed targets set in 2000.

The continuity was embodied in the so-called **Agenda 2030**, defined as “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” and was adopted by the 193 UN member states in September 2015. It compiled the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 integrated and indivisible targets⁶. Among other things, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) widen the concept of “Sustainable Development” regarding the idea of dealing with present needs without compromising the future of next generations. For that purpose, sustainability on the planet must join three essential elements: economic growth, social inclusion and environment protection⁷. On the other hand, another decisive change is introduced: the fact that these goals are applicable for every country in the world, and not only for the poorest as suggested in the MDGs in 2000.

International Conference on Education for All was held in Muscat (Oman) from 12 to 14 May 2014 resulted in the so-called **Muscat Agreement**, which formed the basis for the formulation of the fourth Sustainable Development Goal on education, as well as its objectives and related means of execution. The World Education Forum was held in Incheon (South Korea) from 19 to 22 May 2015 under the motto “Inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all in 2030. Transform lives through education”. In this meeting, coordinated by UNESCO and sponsored by various institutions as UNICEF, World Bank, UNFPA, UNDP, UN Women and ACNUR, the strategies for the implementation of the **Education 2030 Agenda** were defined and approved⁸.

Besides the **Incheon Declaration**, the 2015 NGO Forum Declaration entitled “Towards the right to inclusive and quality public education and lifelong learning after 2015”, was adopted in this Forum, in order to guide the work and promotion activities of civil society in the coming years. The 2015 NGO Forum was organised through the Collective Consultation of NGOs on Education

for All (CCNGO/EFA), a worldwide network of 300 national, regional and international member organizations across the world (UNESCO, 2015). Furthermore, the World Education Forum (WEF-2015) was preceded by a number of regional preparatory ministerial conferences as well as others held in E-9 countries:

Asia - Pacific

Asia-Pacific Regional Education Conference (APREC)

August 6-8. Bangkok, Thailand

The conclusions of the meeting are compiled in the Bangkok Statement

Latin America and the Caribbean

Regional Ministerial Meeting “Education For All in Latin America and the Caribbean: Current State and Post-2015 Challenges”

October 30-31, 2014. Lima (Peru)

The Lima Statement was the result of the Regional Ministerial Meeting of Latin America and the Caribbean

E-9

10th E-9 Ministerial Review Meeting

November 27-28, 2014. Islamabad, Pakistan

Joint E-9 Statement on education post-2015

Arab Region

Arab States Regional Meeting on education post-2015

January 27-29, 2015. Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt

Available at Sharm El-Sheikh Statement

Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Ministerial Conference on education post-2015

February 9-11, 2015. Kigali (Rwanda).

Declaración de Kigali Statement compiles new 9 priorities established for Africa.

Europe and North America

Regional Ministerial Conference on education post-2015 - European and North American States

February 19-20, 2015. Paris (France).

The priorities for Europe and North America are compiled in the Paris Statement

The Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all”) presented what has been defined as a “new envision of education for the next 15 years”⁹. This new view “is inspired in a humanist conception of education and development based on human rights and dignity, social justice, inclusion, protection, cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity and responsibility and shared accountability (...), from an approach of lifelong learning” (Declaration, p.7)

Along with this type of conferences, UNESCO promoted other meetings of international educational policy as well. It is worth highlighting the **Second UNESCO Forum on Global Citizenship Education** (Paris, January 2015), where “a new pedagogical guide on global citizen education destined to educators, curriculum developers, trainers, policy-makers and other education stakeholders working in formal, non formal and informal settings” was designed (Unesco, 2015, Paris, 11 de Agosto de 2015), as well as other actions related to Peace education, **European Development Days** (EDD) and other activities focused on racism, radicalization, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and other

forms of intolerance (UNESCO, Paris, August 11, 2015).

Realities...

How many actual changes and effective results derive from all these forums and declarations of the major international conferences on education?

In 2001, Rosa María Torres¹⁰, a panelist in the Forum in Dakar, international consultant on education and former minister of Education and Culture in Ecuador, regarding what was signed in Dakar, noted a revealing idea that can be applicable to the most part of this kind of conferences and declarations:

(...)This results in documents which are cover-alls, including everyone but neither representing nor satisfying anyone in particular. That is how international documents and declarations are drawn up and how they end up talking about generalities, coming back to commonplaces, enshrining vagueness and ambiguity, and creating the illusion of shared ideals, consensus and commitment.

In 2016, the deadline for the goals of Education for All and the Millenium Development Goals

(MDGs) was missed. Some organisms and entities analyzed the achievement of these objectives. For instance, in a report published by the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ) which was echoed by the national press at the time (EL MUNDO, ABC, EL PAIS, etc.), a balance of achievements and failures was presented. This way, significant advances were made regarding the reduction of the rate of extreme poverty by half (reduction noted worldwide, from 1900 millions in 1990 to 836 millions in 2015), mortality of children under 5 (reduction from 90 to 43 deaths every 1000 newborns, although it was intended to be 3/4), same with AIDS prevention (aproximate reduction of 40% between 2000 and 2013) and regarding the second objective related to the access to education and improvements in gender equality in schooling. Less advances, however, or unmet challenges remain in the other goals raised, particularly regarding child malnutrition.

One of the goals included in the EFA is universal primary education and adult literacy. Literacy is central to basic education; however, there are more than 900 millions of illiterate adults and tens of millions of children are still out of school, so it is obvious that this target seems far from being achieved.

Women are a particular case. For instance, regarding the goal related to education for girls: girls represent 2/3 of out-of-school youth, and women represent 2/3 of illiterate people all over the world. In the same line, the developing countries hold 95% of births to teenage mothers, and girls are 5 times more likely to become mothers when they present a low educational level. Early and unintended pregnancies have adverse effects on the health, socio-economic status and school achievement of adolescent girls. The major risks are expulsion from their schools and homes, stigmatization by their families, vulnerability to violence, deepening poverty and mortality and health complications for mothers. In fact, pregnancy and labour complications are the second cause of death among adolescent girls between 15 and 19, reaching 70,000 individuals affected each year. (UNESCO, 2017, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002484/248418e.pdf>)

UNESCO presents its own monitoring and performances assessment mechanisms. For example, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS, September 21) stated that 617 million children and adolescents across the world fail to reach the minimum levels of required knowledge about reading and maths (SubSaharan Africa has the highest score: 202 million children and adolescents; being Central and South Asia the following in the rank with 81%, that is to say 241 million children). According to UIS, this points to a “learning crisis” which might compromise the advances towards the materialization of the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 of the UN¹¹.

Closing

A deeper and more exhaustive analysis would probably offer a more precise view of the sense, need, achievements and lost opportunities of the major international forums, assessing the extent to which their final drafts, statements and formal declarations actually meet the achieved goals. The result of the Climate Change Conference COP25 exemplifies the difficulty of obtaining agreements and actual commitments in complex forums where conflicting interests meet, which increases disappointment and disillusionment, given the initial expectations raised. Nevertheless, it has been useful to reinforce the need for a bigger shared responsibility on all kinds of groups and social actors. In this line, from the academic field, scientific societies interested in the educational sphere, such as the Ibero-American Society of Social Pedagogy (Sociedad Iberoamericana de Pedagogía Social), through its different actions and work groups, particularly via our journal (PSRI), must contribute to the debate and keep a critical eye on these major international forums, promoting rigorous studies that assess with real and concrete evidence the social and educational advances stated in these Declarations.

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Notes

- ¹ Vid. For example Pleyers, Geoffrey *Movimientos sociales en el siglo XXI: perspectivas y herramientas analíticas* (2018)./ Geoffrey Pleyers ; contribuciones de Breno Bringel ; prefacio de Boaventura De Sousa Santos. - 1a ed. - Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2018
- ² Objectives: Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children; Ensuring 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; Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes; 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; 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 and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality; Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills. (Dakar, Unesco, 2000, p.36. Informe Final, 26-28 de abril de 2000) «reassures» the vision and goals agreed in Jomtien in 1990.
- ³ In Jomtien the Global Initiative on Education For All was approved (EFA implies a wide vision of basic education which intervenes in the basic learning needs of all children, youth and adults. EFA proposes six goals: universal primary education, adult literacy, gender equity and quality of education, and highlighted the role of education as a key to alleviate poverty as well as to reach the goals of democratic societies (UNESCO, World Education Forum 2000: Final Report, 2000).
- ⁴ World Declaration on Education for All <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0009/000975/097552e.pdf>. The Dakar Framework for Action. Education for All: meeting our collective commitments <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000121147>
 1. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children
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 6. Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills

Source: UNESCO. *The Dakar Framework for Action*
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000121147>
- ⁵ Millenium Development Goals MDGs
 - Goal 1: To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
 - Goal 2: To achieve universal primary education
 - Goal 3: To promote gender equality and empower women
 - Goal 4: To reduce child mortality
 - Goal 5: To improve maternal health
 - Goal 6: To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
 - Goal 7: To ensure environmental sustainability
 - Goal 8: To develop a global partnership for development
- ⁶ 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
 - Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
 - Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
 - Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
 - Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
 - Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
 - Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
 - Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.

Goal 8. *Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.*

Goal 9. *Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation.*

Goal 10. *Reduce income inequality within and among countries.*

Goal 11. *Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.*

Goal 12. *Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.*

Goal 13. *Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts by regulating emissions and promoting developments in renewable energy.*

Goal 14. *Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development*

Goal 15. *Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss*

Goal 16. *Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.*

Goal 17. *Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.*

Source: United Nations, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly. September 25, 2015. <http://www.un.org/es/comun/docs/?symbol=A/RES/70/1>

- ⁷ The declaration places considerable emphasis on the climate change as essential for sustainable development and poverty eradication. "Sustainable development cannot be achieved without the measures related to climate change since it affects public health, food and water safety, migration, peace and security"
- ⁸ UNESCO (2015). 197 Executive Board meeting. Paris, August 7. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000234002>
- ⁹ UNESCO. Education 2030. Incheon Declaration <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245656>
- ¹⁰ Torres, R. M.^a (2001). ¿Qué pasó en el Foro Mundial de la Educación?. Revista: *Educación de Adultos y Desarrollo* 56/2001. (Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e.V., DVV)
- ¹¹ Vid. <https://es.unesco.org/news/617-millones-ninos-y-adolescentes-no-estan-recibiendo-conocimientos-minimos-lectura-y>