Six Lessons from UNESCO's 2018 Global Education Meeting
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[Picture 1 here]

The first Global Education Meeting (GEM) since the 2015 promulgation of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was held in Brussels last week. The purpose of the meeting was to review "progress towards the global education targets and commitments in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (GEM homepage) and subsequently set the international community's education agenda for the next four years.[1] The meeting resulted in the Brussels Declaration and outlined key messages to be discussed at next year's United Nations High-Level Political Forum, which will focus on education. Bringing together ministries of education from 60 UNESCO member-states, multinational institutions, civil society organizations, and the private sector, the 350-person meeting produced much fanfare and publicity for both domestic and international audiences, celebrating the global commitment to the education SDG, SDG 4, while noting challenges to achieve targets by 2030.

In an effort to record part of the formative history of the SDGs, I offer six lessons I learned from the meeting. I had the privilege of attending the meeting as a member of the press. Sitting in a translator's booth on the conference sidelines, I recorded sessions and interviewed participants, four of which will air as FreshEd podcasts starting December 17. The lessons, photos, Twitter posts, and audio clips presented below are curated by me alone, and do not represent the institutions that supported my participation; however, I hope my first-hand account of the GEM offers an everyday insight into the minutia that is the messy arena of global education governance.

Lesson 1.   History matters

A major conclusion from the meeting was that the international community is "not on track to achieve the SDG4 targets by 2030" (Brussels Declaration, p. 1). Despite many reasons why this may be the case (e.g., limited funding), Aaron Benavot, the former director of the Global Education Monitoring report, reminded me that history matters. The very process of creating the SDGs in the early 2010s, he explained to me, is the primary reason why today global consensus has not been reached on measuring some targets. In my conversation with Aaron, which will air on FreshEd December 24, he suggested that the SDGs were developed by government officials with little expertise in statistics or education. Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, targets and indicators were designed long after the SDGs were created. For Aaron, this history is important because it has structured (and limited) the very debates about SDG 4 today. Listen to Aaron explain his take on the importance of history:

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[1] Priority areas include: Making education and training systems more equitable and inclusive "leaving no one behind"; Eradicating illiteracy; Including migrants, displaced persons and refugees in education and training systems; Providing quality gender-responsive education and training; Strengthening education for global citizenship and for sustainable development; Providing open, flexible and responsive education and training systems to meet new skill needs; Improving teachers, educators, trainers and school leaders; and increasing investment in education.

[insert Audio Clip 3]

Lesson 2.   SDG 4.7 is at risk

SDG 4.7 is perhaps the most celebrated target for its focus on quality outcomes of education. Aaron Benavot told me it was "without president" in the history of education goals. But the target is also the most problematic. How will the international community reach consensus on the meaning of terms such as "global citizenship education" or "education for sustainable development"? In one presentation by UNESCO Institute of Statistics Director Silvia Montoya, I learned that SDG 4.7 is at risk. Methodological challenges coupled with limited funding make its future uncertain. The key slide was captured in a Tweet by Yona Nestel:

[insert Embed Script 1]

And here is Silvia expressing the risk in her own words:

[Audio clip 5]

Astute listeners will realize that Silvia, who will join FreshEd on December 17, did not say what would happen to indicators without adequate funding or global consensus on their measurement. In my conversations with conference-goers, however, I learned that target 4.7 may be discarded all together by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators, the group "tasked to develop and implement the global indicator framework for the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda" (IAEG-SDGs website). There is a meeting scheduled for mid-December, at which point we will know if SDG 4.7 will be saved – or scarped.

Lesson 3.   The importance of process

[insert picture 3]

International meetings that produce declarations are filled with public and private negotiations on what should be included or excluded in the final document. Semantics are paramount in global governance. The 2018 GEM was no different. The public session on the draft declaration saw UNESCO member-states voice concern on the precise wording of sentences or on absent topics. After each pronouncement by a member-state, private discussions followed on the sidelines. Russia voiced the strongest objections to parts of the draft declaration. Listen to an English interpretation of the Russian delegation explaining its objections:

[insert Audio clip 1]

The chair of the session, UNESCO Director of EFA and Education 2030 Jordan Naidoo, managed the responses by member-states to Russia's remarks. After the public session, I watched the Russian delegation rush to speak privately with Jordan and UNESCO Assistant Director-General Stefania Giannini. What they discussed remains a mystery to me because no microphone picked up their conversation; however, reading the final declaration makes clear that Russia got its way

on most of its objections. This small moment taught me that the delicate process of consensus-building is at the heart of global governance.

Lesson 4.   Inequality without class

[insert picture 2]

On the second day of the conference, Queen Mathilde of Belgium entered the room and the audience spontaneously stood in deference. There are of course protocols and etiquette for royalty with which I was obviously unversed, as in the sanctity of my translator's booth I continued to sit. I'm not naïve to the economic machinations behind this respectful display (Belgium hosted the GEM), but at the same time I couldn't help but think about the contradiction of celebrating royalty at a meeting focused in part on reducing inequality. After all, in his book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Belknap Press 2017), Thomas Piketty found that inherited wealth was a major contributor to inequality. As I continued to sit, I dwelled on the larger absence hiding in plain sight: the issue of class.

Nowhere during meeting sessions was the issue of class discussed in relation to education. The lack of any conversation about class is a surprising absence since education plays a key role in the reproduction of class relations. Disturbed by this absence, I asked development sociologist Parfait Eloundou-Enyegue why the SDGs disregarded class:

[Audio clip 2]

Parfait's insight about the false hope of meritocracy leading to social mobility is important. (You can listen to my full conversation with him on January 7.) The SDGs assume meritocracy is universal and that education is, subsequently, a panacea for all social ills. If only more people can receive more and better education, then not only would their lives improve individually but society in general would develop. The Brussels Declaration states in its first key message that education is a "key [driver] for sustainable development" (p. 1); Queen Mathilde similarly called SDG 4 a "win-win project for everyone involved." Yet the belief in the ameliorative potential of meritocratic education is challenged once issues of class enter the conversation. Social mobility, as Parfait says, is a dream deferred for most people.

Lesson 5.   Capitalism as a given

During the breakout session on climate change, an audience member asked why the GEM distributed thousands of plastic water bottles to participants and printed countless sheets of paper. Was this not a waste of resources contributing to climate change? Perhaps. For me, though, the larger issue with climate change is the international community's inability to fault capitalism for rising levels of carbon dioxide and depleting natural resources. Economic growth is assumed to be a positive aspect for sustainable development, so questioning it would be an anathema.

Examining the destruction caused by economic growth is nothing new. Karl Marx in *Capital* vol. 3 pointed to the "free gifts of nature" as an essential input for capital accumulation. He of course could not have foreseen the environmental consequences of capital's unfettered appropriation of nature's resources. Today the destruction is impossible to miss.

Yet, the SDGs exhibit a level of cognitive dissonance in this regard. While SDG 13 calls for urgent action against climate change, SDG 8 aims to promote economic growth. Increases in gross domestic product worldwide require more resources to be extracted from earth and more energy to be used. Such a scenario necessarily means sustainability will not be achieved if growth is to be maximized.

What of education and SDG 4? The meeting said little. There was no mention of using education to inculcate values and beliefs other than commodification and consumerism. Only one person even dared mention the issue of capitalism. Here is Arjen Wals, who will join FreshEd on January 14, diplomatically calling for new economic logics:

[Audio clip 4]

Lesson 6.   Aid not tax

A recurrent message at the GEM was the funding gap in education. Billions of dollars are needed to meet the targets of SDG 4. Since neither development nor humanitarian aid will cover recurrent educational expenditures, the heart of education financing revolves around domestic funding. Yet, at the GEM it was more common to hear conversations about international aid rather than domestic tax systems. David Archer captured this paradox in a Tweet:

[insert embed script 2]

Until the international community aims to create fiscal states, as Keith Lewin pointed out, its aid to poor nations will have the unintended consequence of creating dependency, not development.

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The 2018 GEM was a valuable experience where I witnessed global education governance firsthand. What I witnessed from my little glass box was not black or white. It was not one thing over another. It was a messy arena with diplomatic social norms, where compromises were made, competing value systems clashed, and collective action hammered out. Will the GEM contribute to the world's most pressing issues? We will have to wait and see.

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