

## **COP 26 and gender equality in education: mobilising data for sustainable change**

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As global leaders, practitioners and activists meet for [COP 26](#) in Glasgow, the impacts of the worsening climate crisis coupled with the effects the Covid-19 pandemic on education systems are sharply evoked. These processes have gendered effects, which are particularly profound for the poorest and most vulnerable individuals, communities and countries. The reductions in aid and the failures of rich countries to deliver on the promises made at COP 25 have not helped progress towards the [17 Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) agreed by the global community in 2015 in order to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all people and the planet by 2030. Indeed, this vision seems increasingly out of reach.

But while periods of acute crisis can reinforce existing inequalities and forms of privilege, they also cause seismic shifts and present an opportunity to reimagine the future. 'Build Back Better' is a rallying cry that has gained momentum and reverberated in different guises around the world, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The notion that something better is possible was echoed in [David Attenborough's moving address at the opening of COP 26](#). This idea has also underpinned the urgency voiced by many activists in Glasgow, including [Greta Thunberg](#), and those watching COP 26 from around the world, who emphasise the need to act on climate and environmental issues. In July when the leaders from the richest countries gathered in Cornwall for the G7 summit, they made commitments to invest in [girls' education](#), while the SDG framework holds them to targets to support gender equality and women's rights.

Yet despite these policy declarations, and as a recent [UN report](#) warns, the international community is still in danger of squandering this precious opportunity to effect meaningful and lasting change unless it acts now. Immediate, complex and collaborative action is essential, taking account of planetary boundaries, but it will not be successful unless it has [gender equality, social justice and sustainability](#) at its core. While equality in education has undoubtedly suffered further as a result of [Covid-19](#) and the [climate crisis](#), 'building back better' cannot happen without a comprehensive, [sustainable programme of education for all](#). World leaders and those who head powerful institutions need to be held accountable for their actions in delivering on this.

Information is key for judging whether actions have or have not happened and for holding those in power accountable. Current global indicators for gender equality and education are insufficient and fail to capture the range of issues, structures, relationships and practices that shape and sustain forms of gender inequality to, in and through education. This lack of suitable indicators for accountability was the case before the pandemic, as evidenced by the inadequate monitoring of the severity and effects of the climate crisis on gender inequalities in education. And the situation with regard to reduced learning outcomes and pressures on education systems is now even more [acute](#). Gender inequalities are varied, complex and intersect with other forms of inequality. Yet SDG indicators for measuring progress towards gender equality in education still centre on gender parity (i.e., measuring girls/women as a proportion of boys/men in any given aspect of education). Gender parity is a clear and easy to understand measure but it is surface deep - it captures just a tiny, shallow part of the

problem, and both masks and distracts us from the much larger challenges that lie beneath. For example, measuring the numbers of girls and boys both in and out of school after extended school closures is important but does not capture individuals' or communities' experiences of learning or lack of learning during and after periods of crisis, or the changes in pressures and demands within households and neighbourhoods, the levels of insecurity and violence that may have been experienced, or the forms of support that may or may not have been mobilised.

We need information on all these processes to turn ambition for action on the climate crisis and the effects of the pandemic into commitments, and commitments into further action and practice on the ground. This process of making ideas a reality requires genuine participation from all stakeholders to work together to identify the intersecting forms of inequalities at many different levels and to address the most pressing needs for gender equality in education. Organising this in depth consultation requires sufficient resourcing as well as robust measurement tools and processes. This entails widening the circle of who designs indicators, and involving the groups who can hold governments and authorities to account on their commitments: civil society and women's groups, teacher groups, unions and local officials. As we respond to the call to 'Build Back Better' in order to support the realisation of substantive gender equality in education globally, it is thus crucial we determine what the key concerns are for gender, education and measurement under complex conditions of crisis and within and across diverse contexts.

These processes were the theme of a recent international workshop convened by the [Accountability for Gender Equality in Education \(AGEE\)](#) project on 23– 24 June 2021, in recognition that this understanding is not only vital if we are to address current issues, it is also vital for building resilience and strengthening accountability mechanisms. The AGEE project is a collaboration between academics in the UK, Malawi and South Africa, hosted by the [Centre for Education and International Development \(CEID\)](#) at UCL Institute of Education, University College London. The project is working to develop an innovative indicator framework for measuring gender inequalities and equalities in education that supports the SDGs, specifically SDG 4 (the education goal), and wider government and civil society initiatives on gender equality and education, with some recent contributions to work on the gendered effects of [Covid-19 on education](#) and reflections on the effects of the [climate crisis](#).

[The AGEE Framework](#) draws on the capability approach to identify 6 core domains in which to measure gender inequalities and equalities to, in and through education. It is designed to take account of conditions both inside and outside schools and other education institutions. It is also designed to be flexible, not only so that it can be adapted for use within and across different contexts, but also so that it can respond to contemporary issues including periods of change or crisis. A key concern of the AGEE project is to facilitate and engage in participatory dialogue with individuals and organisations interested in education and gender equality, and through this engagement to build and help sustain a [community of practice](#) that can listen to and learn from one another and work together to support transformational change. This concern has been at the heart of the process of developing and refining the AGEE Framework.

The aim of the online workshop in June was to build connections and generate insight and discussion between a range of experts from different organisations with diverse local and international perspectives on and understandings of the impact of the Covid-

19 pandemic and the climate crisis in relation to gender, education and development. Participants shared compelling examples from their work in government and policymaking, local and international NGOs, civil society and academia, of context-specific issues, with an emphasis on measurement-related challenges and opportunities that have emerged or been amplified in the contemporary moment.

The breadth of country contexts represented at the workshop encompassed Malawi, South Africa, Niger, Somalia, Kenya, Bangladesh and India; cross-national initiatives and aid-supported projects were also discussed. Measurement challenges that were highlighted connect to issues of conceptualisation, data availability and reliability, data collection processes, and data sharing/organisational capacity.

Challenges that were identified include:

- The need for better indicators to help us understand the differences within and between contexts and on specific issues that link to forms of crisis and their gendered effects. Some examples of areas where indicators are needed include migration, trafficking, changes in informal/formal work, school closures for different reasons
- The scarcity and fragmented nature of data, particularly a lack of primary data and thus reliance on secondary data, such as police or health statistics which present additional interpretative challenges
- A lack of disaggregated data, both on COVID-19 and the effects of the climate crisis, which would help to identify those most at risk
- The need for qualitative data to understand people's lived experiences of crisis, which is costly and time-consuming to collect at the best of times but especially challenging in the midst of a crisis. These data are difficult to capture through online methods; using phones and online surveys for data collection will exclude the experiences of those who are most vulnerable and marginalised
- Poor national level data leads to poor international data
- Lack of academic research, which could contribute to better knowledge and understanding and inform data and measurement development. Most writing on gender, education and climate crisis comes from journalists
- The huge gap between development approaches, which tend to focus on longer term change, and humanitarian responses to immediate problems with little or no time to wait for data
- Unwieldy or insufficient measurement tools
- Reliance on individual will, for example, of particular government ministers or individuals in organisations
- Little holistic and joined up thinking within and across sectors
- Constrained resources and overwhelmed statistical offices
- Mismatch between policy and reality on the ground, which compounds the inadequacy and unsuitability of measurement tools and data to capture crucial issues and support meaningful change

A further, and overwhelming concern raised during the workshop was that education systems were already struggling before the pandemic, and failing to address intersecting inequalities. Dealing with the impact of Covid-19, along with the worsening impacts of the climate crisis are thus additional burdens on top of many longstanding and deep rooted complex problems and injustices that individuals, institutions and governments face.

Nonetheless, despite problems, hierarchies, exclusions and arrogance across the field of international development, there has been a long running concern with collecting and using information to support change. By providing space for people to come together, share ideas, understandings and experiences of what challenges and opportunities around data and measurement there are, and incorporating this knowledge into the AGEE Framework, the AGEE project hopes to contribute to better understanding of and addressing those gender inequalities to, in and through education that lie both on and beneath the surface. Collaborating and thinking outside our silos to develop deeper understanding of the nexus between education, gender and forms of crisis is important for building resilience and adaptive capacity. Better understanding is vital for identifying key issues, which in turn would support the pressure to ensure meaningful data is collected – data that can be used to drive change and address inequalities. If we want to effect meaningful, just and sustainable change, then we need to stop merely focusing on what is easy to measure and work out ways to measure and change what really matters. COP 26 gives an opportunity to remobilise and focus activity at multiple levels across the world. Work on gender equality and education has much to contribute to this process.



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