

Why SDG 4.2 is counterproductive

Trend analysis¹ shows that SDG 4.2 has been counterproductive:

- globally, the expansion of preschool education began to slow down in 2015 and came to a standstill in 2020.
- low-income countries, have disinvested in preschool education for the 3- and 4-year olds while prioritizing enrolment in primary education.

These and other counterproductive consequences of SDG 4.2 were foreseen in 2015. The text below is copied from an email message that I sent to a number of ECD colleagues on 19 September 2015 in an attempt to either amend SDG 4.2 or to prevent its adoption. The text argues that the goal of providing just one year of school readiness training (instead of three years of holistic education) falls short of the policies, goals, targets and objectives that countries had in place prior to the process. Instead of stimulating countries to go the extra mile, the unambitious SDG 4.2 was likely to seduce governments posteriorize preschool and to prioritize other, more ambitious SDGs, both within and beyond education.

Unfortunately, this is precisely what happened. Therefore, this email is still relevant as an explanation of what went wrong. Below you can find the text of the email of 19 September 2015. This text has been edited and shortened, but the substance has not changed.

Message of 19 september 2015 to stakeholders in ECD

Van: van Ravens, Jan

Verzonden: zaterdag 19 september 2015 15:42

Aan: XXX

CC:

Onderwerp: SDG 4.2 is counterproductive / three options to resolve it

Dear colleagues,

It is with sincere apologies that I am asking your kind attention for an extensive email about draft SDG number 4.2, which reads “by 2030, all children should have access to early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education”. The proposed indicator speaks of “at least one year” of preschool education.

This goal falls short, to considerable extent, of the stated goals and plans that countries have in place today. Hence, instead of stimulating countries to do *more* than what they already have in mind (which is the point of a benchmarking process such as the SDGs) goal 4.2 seduces them to do *less*, also in light of competing goals 4.1, 4.3, 8.5 and 8.6.

This message aims (i) at explaining why goal 4.2 with its current text is counterproductive and (ii) at proposing a solution. First, the message makes some general remarks about

¹ The paper with the trend analysis is currently being peer reviewed. However, the relevant information can also be found on pages 4 and 5 (narratives for figures 1 and 2) of the paper titled “The Preschool Entitlement”, published by RTI Press.

benchmarking. It then assesses the probable consequences of the current text of goal 4.2 at country level. This is then confronted with countries' actual level of ambition today. After an intermezzo addressing the role of the composite indicator (or index) of child development, the analysis is summarized - and hopefully brought to life - by means of a "fictive quote" from a Finance Minister in a developing country. This email message is concluded by three options to resolve the problem, taking into account that there is limited time left for substantial changes in the SDGs.

1. Benchmarking in general

Benchmarking means: comparing organizations or countries (or other jurisdictions such as states, municipalities) on the basis of one or more indicators in order to create "peer pressure". This is a benign form of sound, positive rivalry in which organizations or countries challenge one another to perform better and better in the fields to which the indicators pertain. Emulation might also be a word that captures it. Examples of international benchmarking involving nation states are the MDGs, EFA, the EU Process of Open Coordination, and indeed the SDGs.

The benchmark is a certain value or score on the relevant indicator. E.g. if the youth unemployment rate is the indicator, the benchmark could be that all participating countries will have reduced youth unemployment to a level of 8% or less, by the end of the relevant period. Determining the benchmark is a complex process that should not be underestimated. Scientific knowledge and feasibility assessment play a key role but are mediated by political considerations. One of the many rules of thumb is that a small group of best-performing countries (in the order 10% of the total number) should already have achieved the benchmark, or at least be close to it. This top-group has the function of demonstrating the feasibility of the benchmark. This avoids that leaders of other countries might argue that the benchmark is unrealistic. The remaining 90% of the countries - so is the thinking - are then challenged to do their utmost best to achieve the benchmark within an X-number of years. To be very clear: the idea is that these countries do *more* than what they would have done without the benchmarking process. The idea is not that they do *less*.

Another key point is the delicate relation between the benchmarking process and the adage of *national autonomy*. For example, when EU countries started their education benchmarking process, they felt it was extremely important that aspects of national culture and identity remained unaddressed. It was acceptable to introduce a benchmark saying that reading proficiency should go up to level X, or that school drop out should go down to level Y, but countries were very keen on retaining full autonomy with regards to education content, to language of instruction, and to the norms and values that they themselves wished to be central in education.

2. The current text of goal 4.2

The current draft benchmark would imply that all children receive at least one year of quality pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education. The words “at least” may be intended to keep open the possibility that children attend more than just one year, but the reference to school-readiness will probably result in the opposite. There are school-readiness programs of just 100 or 150 hours², while the so-called “built-in program” is even more limited.

The built-in program is a school-readiness program that covers a couple of weeks *within* grade 1. This means that the same grade 1 teachers are teaching the same grade 1 children as they would have done anyway, and they do it in the same austere grade 1 classrooms. But during the first few weeks it is *called* a school-readiness program, and after that it is *called* grade 1. Grade 1 is not extended to allow for the extra content. This means that the content of Grade 1 is compressed in a shorter time span, probably annihilating whatever the impact of the school-readiness program was. The country that is piloting this built-in modality is motivated by its ambition to achieve a certain level of enrolment in preprimary education in order to qualify for the status of lower middle-income country.

This example illustrates that the leadership of countries is sometimes prepared to take sub-optimal measures in order to formally achieve a certain target. When we define a benchmark, we should anticipate such behavior in order to prevent it.

3. Countries' current stated goals and plans

Having seen that the *practical* implication of the current text of goal 4.2 is that countries will provide somewhere between 100 and 600 hours of school-readiness by 2030, the question is now: what are *currently* the stated goals and plans of countries? We first discuss typical ages (entry age, duration) and then functionality (e.g. school-readiness, holistic child development, socialization, peace building, et cetera).

Of the 206 countries with data in the EFA Global Monitoring Report (edition 2013/14), 142 have age 3 as the entry age of preschool education, 50 have age 4, 12 age 5, and 2 age 6. The exit ages align of course with the entry ages of primary education, which is age 5 in 25% of the world's countries, age 6 in 50% and age 7 in 25%. As a result, preschool has a duration of 3 or 2 years in most countries.

Do note that these are the *official, stated goals* of countries themselves and it is difficult to understand why these have been ignored in the development of goal 4.2. These stated goals are the holy grail. In all my consultancies they have been the point of departure and some countries are even more ambitious, in practice, than their official targets. In Indonesia, for example, the official age bracket for preschool is a modest 5-6 but in practice everybody is

² For reference: a half-day program of one year has about 600 hours.

working hard to universalize preschool for all children aged 3-6. More than half of these are already enrolled in this fourth largest nation of the world.

In all other countries where I worked, the objective was also to achieve full enrolment from age three. True, there is usually a phased approach. Ideally countries prioritize areas and groups with the highest needs. Sometimes I advise to “go age by age”: begin by aiming at universalizing preschool for the five-year olds, then for the four-years olds, and finally for the three-year olds. One could argue that to prioritize the five-year olds is not very different from the current text of goal 4.2. However, the deadline is usually 2020, not 2030! To give countries not 5 but 15 years just to provide 100 to 600 hours of school-readiness is very unambitious indeed.

4. National autonomy regarding content

Having noted that the current goal 4.2 ignores and overrules countries’ own autonomous choices with regards to the age bracket, we find a similar problem with regards to content. All countries in the world have made their own democratic choices with regards to the norms and values that are central to education and to preschool more in particular. Some went through an intensive process to develop standards for early learning and development. Again, it is difficult to understand that this has been ignored: no international organization has the mandate to pressure countries for reductionism toward school readiness, thereby ignoring functionalities such as holistic development, socialization, peace building. Let us look at the lessons of history in the sector of primary education.

In the decades in which the world has been striving for universal primary education, there was never an international statement pushing for reductionism. There was never an MDG or EFA goal that said: universalize at least 4 years of primary school. There was never a statement that said: start at age 6. There was never an adage that preschool education should make sure that children can read and write, or sing the national anthem, or be ready for secondary school. In basic terms: the UN never interfered in primary school. All it ever said to countries was: universalize primary education as *you* know it.

We, the global ECD community, would have achieved most by following the same approach: to respect the holy principle of national autonomy and call upon countries to universalize preschool as *they* know it. Preschool should start at whatever age a country considers to be the best entry age, and with the content and functionality that the country has democratically chosen for preschool.

Instead, we opened Pandora’s box by reducing duration to one year and by reducing the functionality to school-readiness. This created the suggestion that preschool is a public service of lesser importance, open for bargaining. Let us now look at how other communities have fared.

5. Competing SDGs

The secondary education lobby, to begin with, has been very successful. Both the Incheon Declaration of EFA and goal 4.1 of the SDGs call for the full completion of secondary education, including upper secondary. The evidence for universal upper-secondary completion is very weak compared to the evidence for universal preschool. Even in the most “developed” countries, there is a group of about 10% of the age cohort that are simply not born to stay in a classroom until the age of 18. In other words, achieving this goal will be very costly given the need for intensive guidance and counseling, on top of the education provision itself. And what to think of goal 4.3: *all* youth should complete either TVET or higher education. Furthermore, in order to provide employment to match this flood of additional skills and competences, goals 8.5 and 8.6 (the Decent Jobs agenda) require the massive creation of employment all over the world. Personally, I think this emphasis on formal education achievement should have been mitigated by combining it with life skills and livelihood programs that are more relevant to the lives of many people today. But this thought is irrelevant: the existence of the super-expensive goals 4.1, 4.3, 8.5 and 8.6 is a political fact and it will draw funding away from preschool, which has a target so unambitious that it falls short of the targets that countries have in place before SDGs.

We can find our brothers and sisters of the other lobbies (primary education, secondary education, TVET, higher education) on our own beloved Heckman curve: in the middle and to the right, with rates of return far lower than that of preschool. Yet our opponents have won this battle. The reason: tunnel vision. We continued to focus on providing ever more scientific evidence, even when the case for preschool was already much stronger than the case for the other sub-sectors of education. But we ignored the politics of international benchmarking.

6. An intermezzo: the child development index

In addition to goal 4.2, the draft 2030 Agenda also has a composite indicator or index that measures various aspects of child development. In theory, this could function as a safeguard. The idea is that countries cannot afford to provide an inadequate school readiness program because that would lead to a low score on the index.

In other sectors there is broad experience with indices that cut across multiple sectors. The lesson that was learned is that these are good instruments to *monitor* the performance of countries, but they do not always *drive* their performance since countries generally do not know how to *respond* to such an index. An example is the Global Competitiveness Index of the WEF. To improve its score on this index, a country would need to meet at least two conditions. First, there needs to be sufficient capacity to understand which actions need to be taken in the respective sectors (services, industry, agriculture, labor market, finance, trade conditions, infrastructure, ICT, et cetera) to improve the score. This requires strong analytical capacity. Second, someone at a central position (e.g. the President’s office or the Treasury) needs to have the power to make a whole array of line-ministries act accordingly. This, on its turn, requires a fairly centralistic style of governance. Cuba and France are good

examples of countries that fulfill both conditions, but are not among the most challenged countries when it comes to child policy and child well-being. In contrast, countries with the highest needs are not likely to be able to respond to the indicator. Thinking back of dozens of missions in the past 7 years, I suspect that most of the civil servants I met will look at their country's score on the indicator and its position on the global ranking with interest, but they are not likely to act on it. And even if they would, there are more cost-effective ways to improve the score than through preschool. For example, enhancing child survival through immunization and skilled birth assistance has a higher benefit-to-cost ratio than preschool; the same goes for simple but highly effective items such as mosquito-nets and food fortification. The most powerful influencer of U5M is poverty reduction, which is often driven by economic growth more than by policy.

The conclusion from this section is that the composite indicator of child development, while being an excellent tool for analysis, will probably not have a lot of political influence and is unlikely to prevent countries from posteriorizing preschool.

7. A fictive quote from a Minister of Finance

This section consists of *a fictive quote*: a monologue that we *might* hear from the Minister of Finance of a country that we visit in November 2015, on the assumption that the text of SDG 4.2 stay as it is. I apologize for the rather unusual rhetorical tool of a fictive quote, but it is a good way to summarize the preceding analysis and to bring it to life. This fictive quote also is a bridge to the last section of this email that contains three options for a way forward.

Quote: “Thank you, Sir, for this interesting draft report. You have clearly shown us a way towards universal participation in preschool by 2025, for all children aged 3-6. This has been advocated for a long time by our colleagues of the Ministry of Education, backed up by Unicef, Plan International, Save the Children and what have you. But now there is a concrete, feasible plan. Thanks again. You are absolutely right that our country has seen 5-10% GDP growth over the last decade, and that the fertility rate has come down. Moreover, universal primary education is in sight. So we fulfill all the necessary conditions for universal preschool. However, we recently received this new report from the UN. Have you seen it? [The Deputy Minister flags the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development]. As you know, the UN is the highest authority in the world. And this document calls itself an ambitious agenda for the planet. But even this ambitious document says it is OK to provide just a school readiness program, and they are giving us 15 years to do it. At the same time, we need to make huge investments in secondary education, TVET and higher education. And we have to create 1.639.500 decent jobs. So what we will do is to phase out all public funding for the three and four year olds. This means we go back to 1998 when preschool was only funded from fees and by NGOs and FBOs. And the money we save by this measure will go to upper secondary education, TVET and higher education. Then, by 2025 we will start working on goal 4.2. As your report has shown – thanks again – 70% of the five-year olds are already in a pre-primary program. So the five years between 2025 and 2030 will be enough to close the gap. We won't have a lot of money for it – because of the decent jobs agenda – but it seems you can satisfy goal 4.2 with a short school readiness program within grade 1. This will not

cost anything out-of-pocket. Well, you need to give some training to those grade 1 teachers. But you know how it goes: you issue an official decree that there will be training, you provide it to a first round of schools, and then you just forget about it. It's called policy-evaporation. So this is the plan. Thanks again for your report and let's talk further in 2030!"

End of Quote. The next and last section of this message proposes three options to avoid this nightmare scenario.

8. Three options

The question for this section is: how can we close Pandora's box? How can we avoid posteriorizing preschool and move to a position where we can call for the full universalization of preschool, entirely according to countries' own age brackets, standards, goals and plans.

Option 1. Keep the goal, change the wording

Changes in the wording of goals will be possible until early 2016, although they may not be welcomed. Our best chance lies in simply deleting some words rather than adding some. This makes the text shorter, which is something that people like. My proposal, therefore, is to delete the words "so that children are ready for primary school". Ideally, I would add words to call for the provision of preschool according to countries' own choices, but this will be difficult and might even be redundant. Deleting the quoted words will give a chance to confront policy makers with their own country's ambitions. It brings us in the position to say that SDG 4.2 implies the full provision of preschool: not just for 100 or 150 hours or a year, and not just for school-readiness or whatever, but in accordance to the formal commitments that countries have made earlier to their citizens.

Option 2. Merge goals 4.1 and 4.2

This is more farfetched than just deleting some words, but we may have a chance since it reduces the total number of goals. This, too, is something that people will appreciate, since the SDGs are widely being criticized for being too numerous.

The merging would simply imply the deletion of goal 4.2 and the insertion of the word "pre-primary" in goal 4.1 so that it reads: "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality pre-primary, primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes".

This option has the disadvantage, at least to some of us, that ECD no longer has its own goal. I know that this has been a dream for some of us and perhaps a personal achievement. However, we will easily agree that the only thing that counts at the end of the day is the interest of children. And as goal 4.2 is counterproductive to them, it is better merged with another goal in the proposed manner. In the text of goal 4.1 as suggested above, preschool is fully on par with primary and secondary education. It is as if we are saying: nobody messes with primary and secondary education, so nobody messes with preschool either. Countries must universalize all three according to their own choices. Period.

Option 3. If all else fails, delete goal 4.2

My personal preference is option 2, with option 1 as the second-best option. But if both fail, we should really ask ourselves in all honesty this question: if the choice is between keeping goal 4.2 as it is or to delete it altogether, isn't it better to delete it given the fact that it is counterproductive? After the deletion of goal 4.2, I can still confront a Deputy Minister of Finance with his/her country's stated goals and plans. I can say: you are an autonomous country, and just because preschool is not in that UN document, this does not take away your responsibility to deliver on the promises you made to your citizens.

Deleting a goal will always be possible if it is requested by the same group that has been pushing for it. If we jointly say: we rather have no goal than this goal, this request will probably be fulfilled, again because it reduces the number of goals.

I know that this, too, will be a great disappointment to many of us. But the value of having "our own goal" should always be weighed against what it is that this goal does concretely for children in countries. If that is negative on balance, we should be able to accept our loss.

Yours sincerely,

Jan van Ravens