



Book Review

Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education. Report from the International Commission on the Futures of Education. Sahle-Work Zewde, Chairman, Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2021, ISBN: 978-92-3-100478-0, pp. 189

In thinking about the agents of change and development, education remains the central catalyst of all that man has accomplished. Paradoxically, all that humans have failed to accomplish are inextricably linked to education of some sort or the lack thereof. This sentiment is probably topmost in the mind of the Audrey Azoulay, the UNESCO DG, who wrote in the foreword to the Report of the International Commission on the Future of Education that “we need to take urgent action to change course, because the future of people depends on the future of the planet, and both are at risk. The report proposes a new social contract for education – one that aims to rebuild our relationships with each other, with the planet and with technology”.

This is the key issue addressed in this seminal report on the Futures of Education. The commission, appointed in 2019 was led by HE Sahle-Work Zewde, President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and included leading 17 leading world public figures, held working sessions in all continents, and consulted with a wide range of private and government groups and agencies, including educators, scientists and human relations experts. The commission explored the issue of education from different perspectives with a view to charting the course of education for the future, with the year 2050 and beyond as chronological markers. However, it is uncertain whether this target is not too ambitious in the ever changing local and global societies. The immediate impact of the report to a careful reader is that it offers a means of addressing the immediate social concern in our interconnected human society amidst geopolitical shifts, accelerated environmental degradation and climate change, changing patterns of

human mobility and the exponential pace of scientific and technological innovation.

The report takes off with an extensive introduction to the theme, raising an alarm that the survival of humanity, human rights and the living planet are at risk, carefully highlighting the need for a new social contract for education and the need for a redefinition of the education enterprise itself. What is clear to those familiar with these international explorations in ideas is that not much has changed since the publication of the reports of two important international commissions earlier appointed by the previous UNESCO Directors-General. The current Sahle-Work report on *Futures of Education* is a nostalgic reminder of the seminal Faure report on *Learning to Be* and Delor's report on *Learning: The Treasure Within* which delineated the challenges confronting human societies and how education might play a role in resolving the tensions now and in the future. What is perhaps more interesting about the Sahle-Work report is the intensity with which it highlights these objectives.

The main part of the report consists of nine standalone chapters organized into three broad parts. Part 1 captioned *Between past promises and uncertain futures* comprise two chapters with self-explanatory headers. First, towards more equitable educational futures; and, second, disruptions and emerging transformations. The chapters argue eloquently that equity in education must embrace humanity's many forms of knowledge and expression. And called for renewed and more effective approaches to help students develop the capabilities to adapt to and mitigate climate change. Part 2 captioned *Renewing Education* comprise five chapters. Chapter three focuses on pedagogies of cooperation and solidarity; chapter four deals with curricular and evolving knowledge commons; chapter five relates to the transformative work of teachers; the sixth chapter deals with safeguarding and transforming schools; and, chapter seven focuses on education across different times and spaces. The key issues follow the argument of Noddings that "genuine education must engage the purposes and energies of those being educated. To secure such engagement, teachers must build relationships of care and trust, and within such relationships, students and teachers construct educational

objectives cooperatively. This is a reminder that teachers and students need to form a community of knowledge-seekers and builders. The chapters also underline the need for pedagogies of solidarity to recognize and redress the systematic exclusions and erasures imposed by racism, sexism, colonialism and authoritarianism regimes around the world. It is equally evident that youth-led movements and organisation are approaching social problems differently as evidenced by the *#MeToo movement* and the *#EndSARs movement*.

The report appears vague in part, especially concerning specific approaches that could be adopted to solve the identified social problems. While the major impetus for revising education about two decades back is the force of globalization as they affect capital markets, communication and information. The forces driving the reimagination of education for the future remain the various social and environmental changes that are exerting pressures on global social systems. This demands a new capacity to live in harmony – taking no more or less than is needed for mutual existence and well-being – which can be learned through education. This resonates with the much-touted mantra of Stuart Hall that “the coming question of the twenty-first century is the capacity to live with a difference” (Hall 1993). As human societies race to the midpoint of the twentieth-century learning to empathize, cooperate, address prejudice and bias and to navigate conflict are valuable in every society. Linguistic diversity is a key feature of humanity’s shared knowledge of commons.

Part three of the report captioned *Catalysing a new social contract for education* comprise two chapters, which are clarion calls for the education of the future as much as it makes for education for the future. The eight chapter of the report is titled a call for research and innovation, while the ninth chapter is called a call for global solidarity and international cooperation. These chapters argue that research and innovation must strengthen the human capacities for foresight and futures literacy and that students are important sources of knowledge and understanding about their own educational experiences, aspirations, achievements and reflections. This call for emancipatory research that draws on the lived experience of the educators as much as it educates it also values indigenous and pluralistic ways of knowing

to challenge assumptions to development models and practices. The role of universities, research institutions and their partners was also underscored to place special emphasis on research and innovation to support the renewal of education as a common good. In doing this, four key priorities were identified for the futures of education in relation to research and innovation:

- a. generalized, worldwide, collective research agenda on the future of education
- b. knowledge, data and evidence for the future of education must be inclusive of diverse sources and ways of knowing
- c. educational innovation must reflect a much wider range of possibilities across diverse contexts and places
- d. research for a new social contract for education with everyone invited to take it forward.

The report also highlighted the need for a renewed commitment to global collaboration in support of education as a common good, premised on more than a just and equitable cooperation among state and non-state actors at local, national and international levels. The nationalization of vaccines drew critical attention to the gaps in the ability of nations to work cooperatively against a common enemy as witnessed at the height of the COVID -19 pandemic. The educational needs of refugees and involuntary migrants are also underfunded. It was clearly stated that global institutions will play a unique role in orienting our attention to longer term challenges. As a result, the report calls for UNESCO to rethink its approach to development in order to make the desired impact on the futures of education that is being reimaged. In this way, UNESCO would require new capacities to convene and mobilise people and institutions around the world to shape a shared vision of educational futures.

As with the introduction the concluding part of the report is presented in form of an elaborate Section on *Epilogue and Continuation*, aptly captioned *Building futures of education together*. This section offers the argument that a new social contract has long been in the making – by educators, communities, youth and children, and families – who have identified the limitations of existing educational systems with precision and have pioneered new approaches to overcoming them.

The report presents five dimensions for changes needed to build a new social contract for education. First is pedagogies of solidarity and cooperation. Pedagogy relates to creating transformational encounters that are based on what exists and what can be built. Second, is curriculum and knowledge commons. Two vital processes underpin education: the acquisition of knowledge as part of the common heritage of humanity, and the collective creation of new knowledge and new futures. Third is teachers and the teaching profession, no nation can rise above the quality of its teachers and no technology is yet capable of replacing good human teachers. The fourth relates to safeguarding and transforming schools amidst unrest, insurgencies and various kinds of previous unclassified abuses. Schools are a central pillar of larger educational ecosystems and their vitality is an expression of a society's commitment to education as a public human activity and to its children and youth. The final dimension relates to education across different times and places. As is presently being experienced in various locales of open, distance and digital learning, we can imagine our future societies providing and encouraging learning in a multiplicity of sites beyond formal schools and at planned spontaneous times. One of the major downsides of the report like many other UNESCO reports is that it is too prescriptive and attempts to offer common solutions to diverse societies operating under the UNESCO mandate. The report is further weakened by its inability to show how nations with greater economic force can be convinced or compelled to provide common grounds for futures of education for countries with lower economic capabilities. A major strength of the report is the two calls offered in the last part, the first being a call for a new research agenda for education to interrogate what education is or ought to be in the future and what purpose it should serve in the reimagined future. The second call relates to renewed international solidarity and cooperation, this is of particular importance amidst the instability presently being experienced in eastern Europe which has had a reverting effect on the global economy. I am particularly enthused by the final invitation to continue the dialogue and participation in reimagining the futures of education. However, it is uncertain whether one report or one single commission can do full justice to the topic in the time available. This commission had just about 24 months. Beyond this point however, one must commend the

Sahle-Work Commission for this report for at least moving from dialogue to action by demanding specific action areas by stakeholders in the process of reimagining the futures of education. It is a good report, and I place it side-by-side with earlier seminal works such as Faure's and Delor's reports. I daresay that this report would be a conversation topic at important educational and development discourses for some time to come.

References

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