

“Lifelong learning opportunities for all”: Who pays for it?

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Abstract

In 2015, the UN declared “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” as one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. Lifelong learning has been regarded as the global goal of education; however, it is not clear what lifelong learning, as a policy idea, means to different countries. This paper problematizes this policy idea by drawing a contrast between two key terms *lifelong learning* and *lifelong education* and argues that there has been an increasing emphasis on the former. The policy implication of the emphasis on lifelong learning over lifelong education is that learning opportunities are increasingly provided by private institutions and individuals are expected to manage time and resources for their learning. Because of socioeconomic inequalities not all adults are equally able to afford learning opportunities. The paper concludes that the SDGs may not be achieved by economically poor countries unless national governments take responsibility for ensuring lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Keywords: Least Developed Countries, lifelong learning for all, Sustainable Development Goals, education policy, financing for education

1 Introduction

In the context of globalisation, ideas and information are no longer restricted to the political boundaries of nation-states; one of the ideas highly globalized in recent decades is lifelong learning (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). After the United Nations declared *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all* as the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 in 2015, it has been a global educational agenda (United Nations, 2015). Major supranational organisations that have harmonized educational policies towards lifelong learning not only include the UN and its sister organization United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1972) but also the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1973), the European Union (European Commission, 2000), and the World Bank (World Bank, 2011). Until 2015 lifelong learning was the policy agenda of economically developed countries but now this idea has been a new

educational policy for the economically poor countries of the global South known as Least Developed Countries (LDCs, 2020).

Since lifelong learning was declared as SDG 4 in 2015 several scholarly papers have been published. They are helpful for understanding (a) the role of lifelong learning for quality education (Webb, Holford, Hodge, Milana, & Waller, 2017), (b) how lifelong learning as a policy idea was conceptualised (English & Carlsen, 2019), (c) the role of various institutions working at macro and meso levels for increasing participation in learning (Boeren, 2019), (d) why lifelong learning should be regarded as a fundamental human right (Elfert, 2019), and (e) the connection between literacy and lifelong learning (Hanemann, 2019; McKay, 2018). However, with a few exceptions (Regmi, 2015a, 2017, 2019b; Regmi, Andema, & Asselin, 2020) there are almost no scholarly publications that focus on what lifelong learning as SDG 4 means to LDCs.

Building on the previous publications noted above, this paper explores the answers of two questions: How is the idea of lifelong learning constructed in the global educational policy discourses? What are the implications of such discourses on educational policies and plans of LDCs? For exploring the answers of those questions the paper uses key policy documents produced by the UN and its sister organisations (AAAA, 2015; LDCs, 2020; UIL, 2019; UIS, 2012; UNDP, 2019; UNESCO, 1972, 1996; United Nations, 2015), the OECD (OECD, 1973, 2019, 2020), the World Bank (World Bank, 2011) and the European Commission (European Commission, 2000) as the main sources of data. For analysing these documents the paper uses critical policy sociology (Regmi, 2019a) as a methodological framework. In the context of increasing globalisation, the educational policy landscape has shifted from the national to the global level. This shift requires policy researchers to go beyond methodological nationalism for analysing how international organisations and their networks create certain policy discourses (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Using post-Westphalian tradition of critical policy sociology (see Regmi, 2019a) I analyse how international forces affect educational policy decisions of LDCs.

The paper has two main sections. First, I introduce LDCs as a category of countries where lifelong learning, a policy strategy mostly used for creating competitive knowledge-based economies, has been a new educational policy agenda. In the second section, I explore how lifelong learning has been a controversial policy discourse in terms of the financing modality adopted by donor countries and LDC governments. The paper concludes with an appeal for an inevitable role of LDC governments to increase educational budget so as to enhance the participation of underprivileged adults such as women, racialized and indigenous people in lifelong learning.

2 Least Developed Countries

The typologies used by different international organisations for dividing countries into groups differ. For example, the World Bank Group divides countries into four

income groups: high, upper-middle, lower-middle, and low. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) also divides them into four groups but uses different names: Africa, Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and North America (UIL, 2019). LDCs were identified in the early 1970s by the United Nations as a new category of countries with a need for special support measures from the donor communities (Regmi, 2017). They are identified in terms of Gross National Income (GNI), Human Asset Index (health and literacy), and Economic Vulnerability Index (remoteness, share of agriculture in national economy, and natural disasters). Even though several developing countries, also known as Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), have achieved remarkable economic progress in the last few decades, LDCs have lagged behind in several development indicators such as economy, health and education. As shown in Figure 1, as of July 2020, there are 47 LDCs located in Africa (33), Asia (9), Pacific (4) and Caribbean (1).

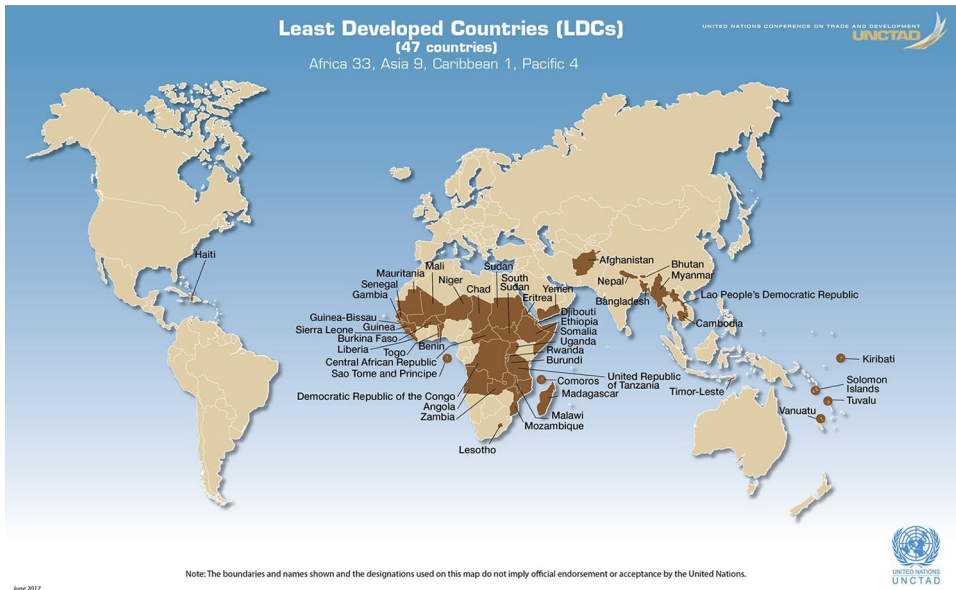


Figure 1: Least Developed Countries¹ (Source: LDCs [2020])

Historically, almost all LDCs have faced challenges brought by colonialism during the 18th and 19th centuries, domestic conflict and the lack of democracy during the post-colonial period that roughly extended from the 1940s to 1970s, and the period of structural adjustments during the 1980s to 1990s that forced them to cut funding for education and health in lieu of paying their international debt (Regmi, 2019b). These countries have continuously faced multifarious problems such as poverty, illiteracy,

1 Link for the map: https://unctad.org/en/PublishingImages/aldc_LDCs_map_large.jpg

health related hazards, conflict and the lack of democracy (Regmi, 2017). About 14 per cent of the global population, which is over 1 billion people, live in LDCs but their aggregate share in the global economy is less than one percent. While the average GNI per capita of the OECD countries is US\$ 40,615, the average GNI per capita of LDCs is US\$ 2,630 (UNDP, 2019). This international inequality might change significantly in the post-Covid-19 period; however, it is very likely that the inequality will further increase and LDCs will continue to be a locus of poverty in the decades to come.

Despite some positive results in terms of gross enrolment rate (about 96 per cent) during Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) period (2000–2015) – that is total enrolment in primary level regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the official age group – LDCs are not able to increase the mean years of schooling which stands at only 4.8 years as opposed to 12 years in the OECD countries (UNDP, 2019). In the context of increasing use of technology and global mobility of students and workers, mostly from LDCs to the OECD, Asian Tigers and BRICS countries, the issue of transforming LDCs economies by matching education skills with available jobs in their home countries has further worsened those challenges.

Several national and international actors such as bilateral and multilateral donors, national governments, charity organisations and philanthropic foundations have targeted LDCs for increasing their literacy rates, combating with health hazards and natural disasters, and institutionalising democratic practices. Despite these measures, problems and challenges faced by these countries have not been resolved (Regmi, 2017). For example, the adult literacy rate – the percentage of the population ages 15 and older who can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on their everyday life – is below 60 per cent (LDCs, 2020). As of 2020, only five of them (Botswana, Cape Verde, Maldives, Equatorial Guinea, and Samoa) have been able to graduate from LDC status (LDCs, 2020).

Educational expansion happened in many LDCs during the post-war period of the 1950s and the 1960s. That was the time when most of them had been released from the grip of colonial powers (Regmi, 2019b). The focus on educational development was observed in terms of increased percentage of school enrolment, higher level of participation in adult education, increase in teacher recruitment and literacy programs (Coombs, 1985). But by the late 1960s it was realized that expansion in education alone did not meet their needs because, even in developed countries, there was a “marked imbalance between the number of graduates and the number of jobs traditionally available to them” (Husen, 1979, p. 206). Lifelong learning, as an education policy idea, emerged as a response to the global crisis in education, especially in the leadership of UNESCO (UNESCO, 1972) and the OECD (OECD, 1973). After 2015 this idea has been a global goal for education (United Nations, 2015) but what the idea of lifelong learning really means to LDCs is not clear, which is the main focus of this paper.

3 Lifelong learning

One of the important factors that have contributed to advance the human civilization to today's stage is human curiosity for learning, or the cognitive development that made learning possible. According to Harari (2014), the author of *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*, the cognitive revolution, which took place between 70,000 and 30,000 years ago, was the main reason behind the emergence of Sapiens (the present-day humans) as the major species to rule the world leaving all other creatures behind. While negative learning such as the production of weapons and exploitation of natural environment has put human civilization at risk, positive learning such as the invention of new medicines, ethics, morality, law and human rights has made a great contribution towards its advancement. According to Piketty (2020), life expectancy at birth increased from an average of 26 years in the world in 1820 to 72 years in 2020. Similarly, the adult (15 years and above) literacy rate rose from 12% to 85% during the same period (see Figure 2).

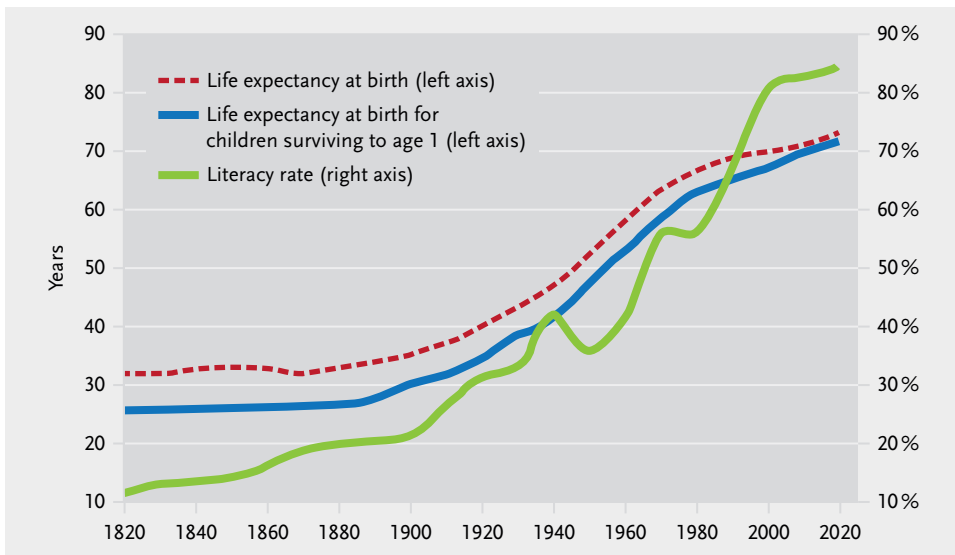


Figure 2: Health and education in the world, 1820–2020 (Source: Piketty [2020])

Harbert Spencer brought the theory of evolution developed by Charles Darwin to study organisms into social sciences, which is known as Social Darwinism. According to this conceptualisation, the cognitive power enabled humans to be competitive hence they have thrived much faster than other organisms. Social Darwinists assumed that everyone participates in a race to win others; therefore, increasing competitiveness through continuous learning is a pre-condition for living a competitive life (Brown & Tannock, 2009). In this image of reality, all individuals should be intellectually, physically and emotionally equipped to compete; which is possible only by

continuous learning. The idea of lifelong learning created in this image of reality can be understood as the human capital model of lifelong learning (Regmi, 2015b). One of the key features of this model is private sector investment in education for providing more choices and options for buying learning.

As human civilisation progressed the ideas such as morality, ethics, justice, equality, and human rights came to inform decisions on who has a greater chance of becoming competitive by participating in education and learning. When the issues of racial, economic, and social inequalities challenged Social Darwinism it became increasingly clear that not everyone does have equal chances to participate in learning (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). Bounded by structural conditions lifelong learning has not been a reality for those who were deprived of even completing a high school degree. Hence, an alternative vision of lifelong learning has emerged, which is characterised as a human-rights approach (Elfert, 2019) as it aims to providing equal chances to everyone to participate in learning activities irrespective of their age, gender, race, and socioeconomic statuses. This idea of lifelong learning can be understood as the humanistic model of lifelong learning (Regmi, 2015b).

In a generic sense, lifelong learning recognises that much of human learning occurs outside of educational institutions, and people continue to learn beyond their school and university education (Regmi, 2020). If we look through the Kuhnian perspective of paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962), lifelong learning can be considered as a new educational paradigm, in which learning incorporates both in-school and out-of-school activities. In this respect, lifelong learning includes all the activities that happen between one’s birth and death. However, the problem with this simplistic definition is that lifelong learning may happen without one’s conscious effort hence it may not need any policy or planning intervention. If this is true, why do we need lifelong learning as a global educational goal? This question warrants a necessary differentiation between the two key terms – lifelong learning and lifelong education – that I explore in the following section.

Lifelong learning vs lifelong education

Though the initiatives towards having lifelong learning as an educational goal seem to be new, the idea itself is not new. The concept of lifelong learning existed with different names such as continuing education, recurrent education, adult learning, lifelong education, and distance education (Ignatovich, 2020). Lifelong learning became an educational agenda of many developed countries after the publication of some landmark reports such as *Learning to be* (UNESCO, 1972), *Recurrent education* (OECD, 1973), *Learning: the treasure within* (UNESCO, 1996), and *Memorandum on lifelong learning* (European Commission, 2000). The idea of lifelong learning constructed by these reports are contested for their ambivalence about whether it is the responsibility of individuals or micro/meso level institutions (Boeren, 2019) to provide lifelong learning opportunities for all. Review of scholarly literature (Elfert, 2019; Regmi, 2015a, 2015b, 2017; Rubenson, 2011) suggests that the humanistic model of lifelong learning is overtaken by the human capital model.

Unlike the humanistic model of lifelong learning, the human capital model aims to increase competition not only among different countries through standardised testing systems such as the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) but also among individuals within a nation and its communities (Regmi, 2015b). This model “gives full recognition and support to the private sector for managing, financing and governing the education system” (Regmi, 2015b, p. 137). The idea of lifelong learning is guided by the human capital model whereas the idea of lifelong education is guided by the humanistic model of lifelong learning.

Though the terms learning and education are often used interchangeably, their (mis)interpretations have significant policy implications. For example, if we draw a distinction between adult learning and adult education, the former refers to knowledge acquired by adults through their own will or personal vocation for learning, which may not need any intervention from macro-level institutions. The latter concept, adult education, on the other hand, refers to the process of imparting knowledge through some kind of state-managed system such as establishment of schools, appointment of teachers who have formal qualifications, and the use of structured curricula and published learning materials such as textbooks. Unlike adult learning, adult education is something governed, managed and funded by national governments. Learning may be lifelong but for education to be a lifelong process macro-level institutions must take their share of responsibility.

In the context of SDG 4, the idea of lifelong learning, rather than lifelong education, has been used as a policy strategy to force individuals to take responsibility, mainly to manage time and resources, for continuous learning. In this context, national governments and international organizations (the macro-level institutions) have championed the idea that everyone should continue to learn but they have taken a backseat in managing resources to support those who are already deprived of education because of structural causes such as class, race, and gender inequalities (Boeren, 2019; Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). In this image of reality, non-participation in lifelong learning is understood as the failure of individuals whereas the governments or international organisations have focused their time and resources just for measuring what individuals have learnt on their own through standardised testing systems such as PIAAC (Regmi, 2019b; Rubenson, 2019).

4 Financing for lifelong learning

The international community outlined the financing modality for SDGs through Addis Ababa Action Agenda, in which they noted that LDCs are “the most vulnerable group of countries” that “need enhanced global support to overcome the structural challenges they face for the achievement of the SDGs” (AAAA, 2015, p. 4). However, the review of the progresses made after 2015 shows that this policy rhetoric is not translated into practice. What has really happened is the fact that LDCs are now opened for business where big corporations are encouraged to make investment in

the form of commercial loans for different sectors including education. As Figure 3 shows, in some of LDCs such as Angola, private sectors invested about USD 180 million in education between 2012 and 2017. This amount may not seem big when compared to the annual budget of some rich OECD countries but total private financing of LDCs covers a significant share (about 6 %) of their GDP (OECD, 2019), which add up to their existing international debt (Regmi, 2019b). Privatisation in education not only makes lifelong learning unaffordable for poor people but also creates a road-block towards the sustainable development of LDCs.

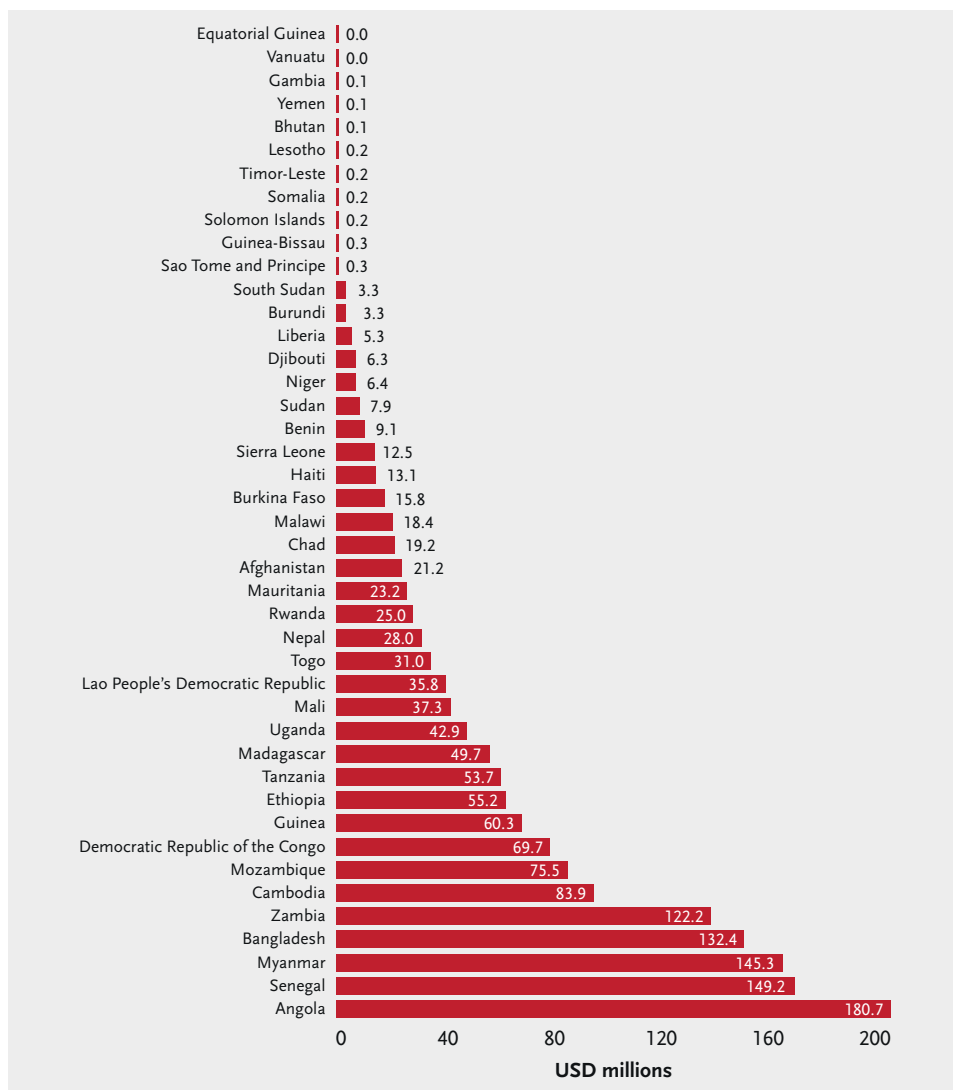


Figure 3: Average annual amount of private finance mobilised per LDC 2012–2017 (Source: OECD [2019])

Official Development Assistant (ODA) was started during the 1970s, which is the same period when LDCs were identified for the first time, as welfare development support for poor countries. Unlike private financing, ODA is concessional, with a grant element of at least 25 percent. Developed countries promised that they would provide a minimum 0.7 percent of their Gross National Product as ODA. While agreeing on action agenda for SDG financing the donor community reaffirmed the commitment of meeting the target of 0.7 per cent (AAAA, 2015, p. 26). Despite their promises, according to OECD (2019), in 2018, ODA to LDCs fell by 3% in real terms from 2017, aid to Africa fell by 4%, and humanitarian aid fell by 8%' (p. 16). As shown in Figure 4, despite several iterations of agreement, only a few countries have fulfilled this commitment and the total average amount of ODA has always been less than 0.4% of the total GNP of donor countries. My critical analysis of the educational policy documents shows that lifelong learning has been a policy rhetoric championed by the donors but in reality, it has increased educational privatisation in LDCs.

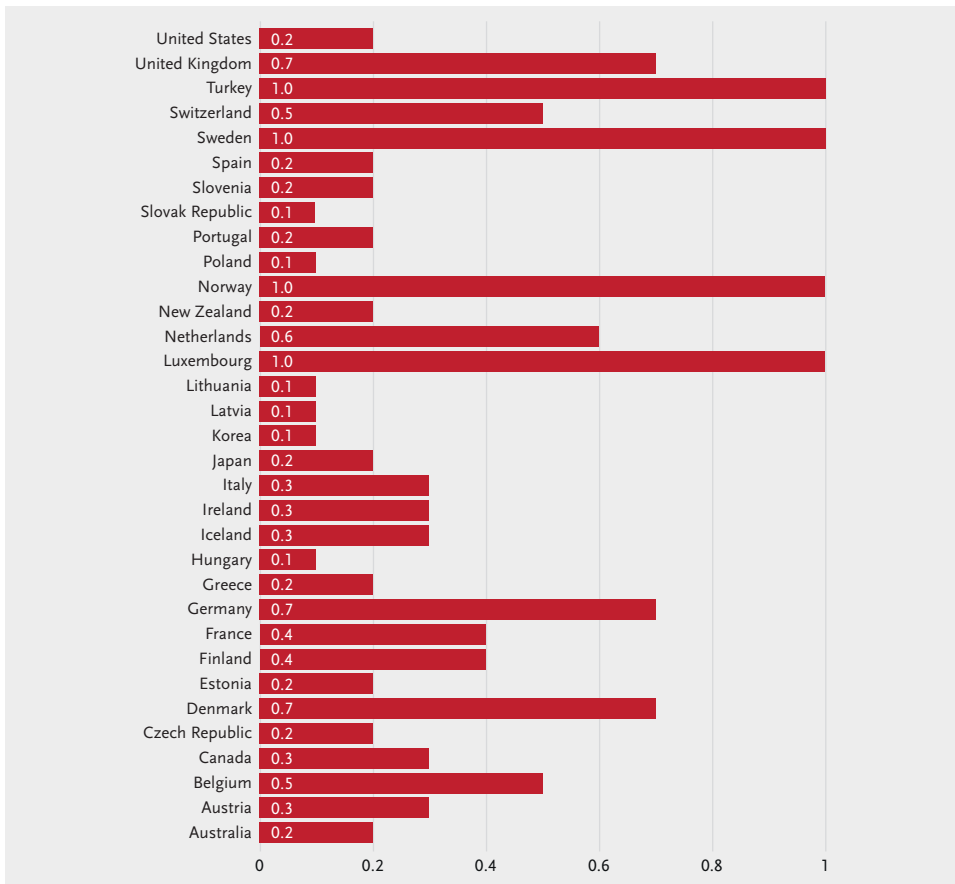


Figure 4: ODA contribution by the OECD countries, 2017 (Source: OECD [2020])

The history of identifying LDCs as a separate group of countries, the establishment of ODA as a support measure, and the multilateral support mechanism created for achieving the SDGs have been justified by the desire of the developed countries to support those who are not as par with them in development (Regmi, 2018). The declaration of lifelong learning for all as SDG 4 is a continuation of this international development model, which very much rests on cooperation among different macro-level organisations. But with the rise of nationalism and protectionism in donor countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom this international mechanism of cooperation has been disturbed (Regmi et al., 2020). As a consequence, financial support, in the form of ODA and other grants, from donor countries to LDCs has decreased. The funding gap created by this disturbance in the international cooperation could have been filled by the governments of each LDC. But as the SDG financing modality presented in Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA, 2015) and the OECD’s blended financing modality suggest the funding gap is being filled, if any, by private sector financing. This financing modality is a hinderance for a sustainable development of LDCs because it is the main cause of socioeconomic inequality (Piketty, 2020).

Financing for lifelong learning in LDCs is constrained not only because of the disturbances in international cooperation mechanisms but also because of the increasing economic inequality within each LDC. Drawing on both methodological globalism and methodological nationalism perspectives of critical policy sociology (Regmi, 2019a; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) I would argue that the economic inequality within LDCs is as detrimental as the inequality between the developed countries and LDCs noted above. Since the 1980s the wealth of the richest 10% people (top decile) has increased in all major regions such as India, the United States, Russia, China, Europe including sub-Saharan Africa where the majority of LDCs are located (Piketty, 2020). This increase in share of wealth among the top decile “has come at the expense of the bottom 50% of the distribution” (Piketty, 2020, p. 21).

Funding from LDC governments for adult learning and education (ALE) has decreased hence there has been a marked increase in private sector investment. The Global Report of Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) 4 (UIL, 2019) noted that in sub-Saharan Africa, where the majority of LDCs are located, 36% of the total countries that answered financing related questions, reported reductions in ALE financing and another 45% reported “no change in ALE spending as a proportion of education spending since 2015” (UIL, 2019, p. 54). On average, LDCs spend about 4% of their GDP on education, which will decrease because of the new challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, in its annual budget 2020–2021 Nepal, one of the LDCs located in South Asia, allocated about 11% of its total budget for education but increasing private sector investment has been Nepal’s key policy strategy.

Income inequality between the top decile and the rest of the population has increased even faster in some LDCs than in the major world regions. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, where the majority of LDCs are located, “the top decile claimed 54% of total income” in 2018 (Piketty, 2020, p. 22), which means that, in 2018, in-

equality in sub-Saharan Africa was higher than in Europe, China, Russia and the United States (see Figure 5). Inequality in wealth and income is a hinderance for an equal, just and democratic society. For promoting lifelong learning as a key social equaliser each country must provide learning opportunities to those 90 % of the population who share just about 46 % of the total national income. Privatisation of lifelong learning, a feature of the human capital model noted above, is a mechanism that will create learning opportunities for those top 10 % people, which is just the opposite of what is needed for providing 'lifelong learning opportunities for all' (United Nations, 2015).

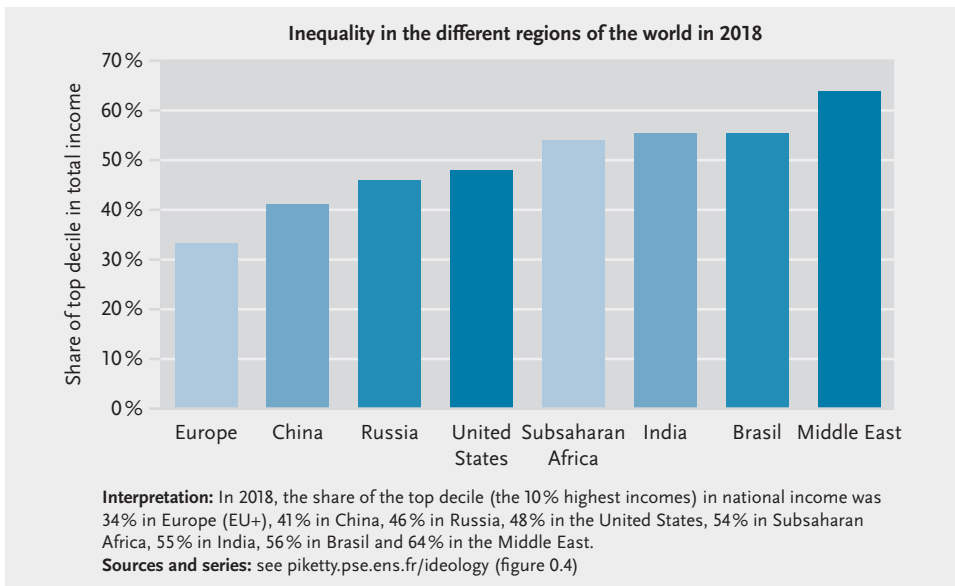


Figure 5: Inequality in the different regions of the world in 2018 (Source: Piketty [2020, p. 23])

5 Discussion and conclusion

A key message of the analysis presented above is that the human capital model of lifelong learning (Regmi, 2015b) very much dominates the policy and planning decisions of international community and LDC governments because lifelong learning is understood as an investment. As a consequence, especially after 2015, the responsibility for managing time and resources for lifelong learning has shifted from donor agencies as well as LDC governments to individual citizens. In this context of educational financing, both LDC governments and donor countries, have used private sector investment (AAAA, 2015; OECD, 2019) as a major mechanism of educational financing. Even if lifelong learning has been discussed as a new policy agenda in all

LDCs the opportunities to participate in it are available only for those citizens who are able to afford or buy learning provided by the private sector.

Achievement of SDG 4 is quite crucial for the achievement of the other 16 goals because education is an undeniable and fundamental prerequisite for ending poverty and hunger, promotion of health and wellbeing, achieving equality, and taking necessary actions for addressing the existential threat brought by global warming (United Nations, 2015). As I noted above, lifelong as a global goal of education puts more emphasis on providing educational opportunities for adult population. While the importance of lifelong learning has been recognized, ALE remains low on the agenda of LDCs hence funding is “insufficient” (UIL, 2019, p. 14). As GRALE 4 report clearly noted, “unless we change direction, we will, quite simply, not meet the stretching targets of SDG 4. And if we do not achieve the goal on education, the other SDGs will be placed in jeopardy” (UIL, 2019, p. 14).

Before 2015 formal education, that is learning opportunities available through school and post-secondary institutions, had been the mode of educational attainment for the majority of LDC people. They made some progresses in terms of increased school enrolment rates during the MDGs period 2000–2015, which was popularly known as *Education for All* (EFA). After 2015 *promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all* has come to influence education policies of these countries, which is a positive policy response for providing learning opportunities to adults. However, these goals cannot be achieved without making sufficient investment from national governments. The main reason, which I stressed in this paper, is that not everyone is able to make investment in education.

In addition to the regular budget allocated by LDC governments, educational funding of these countries comes from external sources such as the UN and its sister organizations, the World Bank Group, the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD, the European Union, and bilateral organisations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Australian Aid, and the UK Department for International Development (DFID). In the context of increasing nationalism and protectionism (Regmi et al., 2020) in the donor countries and the economic crisis brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, funding for LDCs’ education will further shrink. For achieving SDGs, lifelong learning needs more funding from LDC governments because those who lack education are also those who are not able to afford it. Without developing an appropriate mechanism to provide learning opportunities for all, irrespective of their economic status, caste, gender, language and age LDCs may not achieve SDGs.

To conclude, in the context of Covid-19 and the impact it has brought in global economy it is very likely that financial support from donors to LDCs will further shrink. Future researchers might be interested in exploring not only what the post-Covid-19 world looks like but also alternative policy and planning mechanisms for increasing LDC peoples’ participation in lifelong learning.

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