2019 is a big year for the education constituency worldwide as SDG 4 (the education goal in the Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs) was reviewed at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) 2019, amongst several other goals.

UN Member States agreed that the HLPF will carry out regular voluntary reviews of the 2030 Agenda which will include developed and developing countries as well as relevant UN entities and other stakeholders. The reviews are state-led, involving ministerial and other relevant high-level participants, and provide a platform for partnerships, including through the participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders.

For the Asia Pacific, ASPBAE presented 16 civil society Spotlight Reports of its member organisations on SDG 4. In 2019, 47 countries volunteered to present their VNRs to the HLPF 2019. Of these, 15 were from the Asia Pacific with Indonesia and the Philippines conducting VNRs for the 2nd time.

Apart from SDG 4 on quality education, SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), were reviewed, in addition to SDG 17 (partnerships for the Goals) which is reviewed each year. Click for more information on the Thematic SDG Reviews.

The global event, which is organised annually to discuss the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), was held at the United National Headquarters in New York and included a 3-day ministerial meeting where Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) were conducted. The HLPF 2019 was held under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and was themed on ‘Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality’.

For the first time, SDG 4 was reviewed at the HLPF 2019, amongst several other goals.
The reporting to the HLPF is a practice that has gained traction, as dozens of governments are volunteering each year to participate and contribute their VNRs. VNRs are the reporting procedure and review process that stakeholders use to ensure governments create policies and practices that leave no one behind. In 2019, 47 countries (7 for the second time) volunteered to present their VNRs to the High-level Political Forum. Of these, 15 were from the Asia Pacific with Indonesia and the Philippines conducting VNRs for the second time.

Furthermore, civil society coalitions at national and international levels prepared their own shadow or Spotlight Reports to follow-up on their governments efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda. These Spotlight Reports provide the most comprehensive independent assessment of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. For the Asia Pacific, ASPBAE presented 16 civil society Spotlight Reports of its member organisations on SDG 4.

Official session on the HLPF 2019 review of SDG 4

The official session on the HLPF 2019 review of SDG 4 marked the first assessment of the education goal since its adoption in 2015. Speakers characterised the problem as a “global learning crisis.” During the three-hour review session, some 25 countries took the floor to highlight the centrality of education for achieving the 2030 Agenda and outlined policy reforms adopted to tackle inequalities, improve teaching and learning, and support teachers. Major stakeholder groups representing youth, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, LGBT, and the science and technology community also took the floor urging action to make education inclusive, relevant, and respectful of diversity.

Henrietta Fore, the session moderator, identified three needs for a learning revolution, namely – (1) the need for more investment, but also more equitable investments; (2) the need to innovate to reach the unreachable that increases access to quality learning; and (3) the need to measure our progress at all levels, including education in emergencies.

Stefania Giannini from UNESCO identified a need for a paradigm shift in education through transformation and innovation in order to make education future ready. Furthermore, she added that education needs to be more inclusive and to be able to give students the knowledge...
and capacity to become critical thinkers, with respect. Finally, she argued for the need for more teachers who are better equipped. She concluded by saying that “business as usual is the worst thing we can do.”

Professor Kaz Yoshida, co-chair of the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, pointed out that effective learning must encompass the socio-emotional and behavioural dimensions, in addition to the cognitive. He noted the importance of national assessment systems, more efficient and effective spending, and support to teachers.

Representing more than 32 million teachers and education support personnel, Susan Hopgood from Education International (EI) identified five obstacles to the achievement of SDG 4. First, that teaching remains an unattractive profession – low salaries, lack for personal development, high workload, bad working conditions, to name a few issues. Second, in some countries, the rights of educators are being repressed – including freedom of expression. Third, she argued that public education remains unfunded, threatening the goal for free primary education. Fourth, that an inequitable education system continues to persist, especially for marginalised groups like indigenous communities. And fifth, that progress is too slow. Education systems are not catching up with the rapidly changing context, such as climate change. She called for SDG4 acceleration, and working with the educators and unions to achieve the world we want.

Concern over privatisation was echoed by Madeleine Zuniga, Vice President of the Global Campaign for Education and representative of the Major Groups and Other Stakeholders (MGOS), who insisted that education has to be transformative to have justice and achieve transformation towards the world we want. She said the persistence of inequalities is deeply rooted in discrimination and marginalisation which are the cause of conflicts and crisis all over the world. Transformative education is needed to transform lives to transform the world, the ultimate goal of Education 2030. Any kind of revolution in education will be unsuccessful without well prepared teachers, trained within the framework of human rights, aware about the indivisibility of all rights, with education as the great catalyst to achieve all SDGs. She stressed that increasing investment in public education is a must and that it is important to push back on the intervention of private enterprises that have found in education a great profitable business, undermining not only to the right to free education, but also deepening inequalities and damaging social cohesion in societies.
Concluding the session, UNESCO’s Stefania Giannini called for making “inclusion the redline of every policy in education” and emphasised some essential principles to guide action, from empowering girls and women, mobilising finances, and building alliances. “This is not a ‘to do’ list but a ‘to be’ list – to be stronger and wider together, through stronger political will, stronger commitment, and stronger leadership to translate principles into action.”

The session was informed by projections produced by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the Global Education Monitoring Report (Meeting Commitments: Are countries on track to achieve SDG4?) and a complementary publication by the Global Education Monitoring Report (Beyond Commitments: How countries implement SDG4).

HLPF 2019 side-events

Inequality and challenges to peace in the Asia Pacific region and the transformative role of education in the empowerment of people were at the centre of the discussions during the ‘Education to End Inequality and Promote Peace’ side-event held on 10 July 2019. The event was co-organised by ASPBAE along with the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the UN (CoNGO), Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP), Soka Gakka International, Asia Alliance for Development (ADA), General Board of Church and Society (The United Methodist Church), and the Episcopal Church Centre.

The side-event aimed to inspire participants to lobby for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all. It also envisaged that SDG 4 will be broadened into one that is transformative, challenging inequality, and promoting peace. Because SDG 4 was reviewed during HLPF 2019 for the first time ever since the 2030 Agenda was adopted, the year 2019 is considered a momentous one for the education constituency worldwide, especially for ASPBAE that, “believes that civil society must play an active role in the SDG process since we all have a stake in ensuring that all SDG 4 targets are realised by 2030,” said ASPBAE’s Cecilia Soriano in her remarks at the side event.

The side-event was divided into three activities – a panel discussion with resource persons, launch of civil society Spotlight Reports, and a group discussion on the role of education for peace building.
Jordan Naidoo of UNESCO spoke at the event. He highlighted the role of SDG4 towards equality and peace and presented data and information on the issue.

The programme began with an opening address by First Vice President of the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the UN (CoNGO), Cyril Ritchie, on the forum’s contribution to the HLPF 2019, followed by a plenary session on inequality and education that was chaired by ASPBAE President, Nani Zulminarni. It featured talks by Beckie Malay of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) on the ‘Faces of Inequality’, Jordan Naidoo of UNESCO on ‘SDG4 towards Equality and Peace’, and ASPBAE’s Cecilia Soriano on ‘Civil Society Monitoring of Inequalities in Education’.

The side-event also offered a platform for Nani and ASPBAE Executive Council Member representing South and Central Asia, Meenu Vadera, to launch a Regional Report and Civil Society Spotlight Reports on SDG4 prepared by ASPBAE and national education coalitions in 16 countries in the Asia Pacific. The reports represented ASPBAE’s contribution in presenting civil society analysis and perspectives in SDG/SDG4 progress, placing particular focus on the concerns and aspirations of the most marginalised and excluded groups.

Nani declared these spotlight reports as “borne out of a one-year process of consultations with grassroots communities, education sector stakeholders, marginalised youth, and NGOs.” In closing, she acknowledged the diligent work done by ASPBAE’s members and coalitions, noting the importance of the key messages in the reports that highlight education’s “pivotal role in achieving all the SDGs towards transforming our world to one that is peaceful, just and resilient, and where prosperity is shared and enjoyed by all.”

The Spotlight Reports highlighted the power of education as a critical agent for social change that contributes towards transforming our world to one that is just, inclusive, peaceful, and resilient. The reports also noted that inequity in education remains a serious challenge and has actually widened in a significant number of countries. Many governments tend to overlook the magnitude of inequity and gloss over the impact of such disadvantages on access and quality of learning.
ASPBAE calls for equity and attention to the full SDG 4 agenda at the High-level Political Forum 2019
9-18 July 2019, New York, USA

Click to read Spotlight Reports from – Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, Vanuatu, Vietnam.

DVV International and ASPBAE co-organised a panel discussion on 9 July 2019 along with the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) and the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), with support of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The panel discussion, entitled, ‘The Invisible Friend - Adult Education and Sustainable Development Goals’, highlighted the relatively invisible and underestimated potential of non-formal youth and adult education for sustainable development.

Christoph Jost, Director of DVV International, explained the municipal anchoring of adult education in Germany in the form of adult education centres (Volkshochschulen), as well as the worldwide fostering of adult education structures by DVV International and BMZ.

Peace Regis Mutuuzo, Ugandan Secretary of State for Gender, Labour and Social Development, and Philiyan Phissamay, Deputy Director General for Non-formal Education in Lao PDR, reported on experiences from practice and challenges in implementing adult education programmes in their countries. In the ensuing panel discussion, representatives of governmental, scientific, and civil society actors from Africa, Asia, and Europe addressed the audience. The discussion was moderated by Jose Roberto (Robbie) Guevara, Professor at RMIT University, Australia, and former ASPBAE President.

Aaron Benavot, Professor of Global Education Policy at Albany University, USA, tackled the challenge that data on non-formal adult education is often insufficiently comparable and leads to a lack of visibility. Werner Mauch, Senior Programme Specialist at UIL, reported on the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE), which regularly evaluates systematic information on adult education.

Nani Zulminarni, ASPBAE President, spoke about the links between economic development and gender in Asia. She also spoke about the positive impact of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) in enabling the full economic empowerment of women. She stressed that gender-just skills aim to equip women with the necessary
tools to negotiate within their families, deal with the social-cultural norms that impede their access, and offer a supportive ecosystem that facilitates their continued participation in learning.

In conclusion, Katarina Popovic, General Secretary of ICAE, used the title of the event to say, “If we want to transform adult education from an invisible friend into a best friend, it must be better communicated and more present on a global scale.”

Approximately 80 participants from all over the world took part in the discussion. The final declaration of the last international conference of DVV International in Weimar, which contains core messages on the potential of adult education in the context of the 2030 Agenda, was distributed.

The Global Campaign for Education (GCE) organised an Education Caucus on 13 July 2019 that ASPBAE President Nani Zulminarni and ASPBAE’s Cecilia (Thea) Soriano participated in. At the caucus, Nani stressed the need for stronger articulation of the links between education (SDG4) and decent work (SDG8). For the next year, Thea proposed producing a collaborative spotlight report focused on urgent education issues, such as inequality in education – a theme that the Education and Academia Stakeholder Group (EASG) emphasised and wants to hold governments to account.

The side event on ‘Unifying the Playing Field: Local and Global Movements to Advance the Right to Education’, organised by GCE, Light for the World, Global Campaign for Education-United States, and Results International on 12 July 2019, included a session focussed on civil society alternative reports on the right to education in countries undertaking the VNR process. Thea spoke about the rich experience of civil society’s engagement in the VNR processes in the Asia Pacific. Jose Roberto (Robbie) Guevara, Vice President (Asia Pacific), ICAE, and former ASPBAE President, facilitated an inter-regional sharing of civil society engagement in the VNR processes and civil society reports on the right to education in VNR countries.

Azad Foundation, an ASPBAE member in India, co-organised a side event on 15 July 2019 along with the American Jewish World Service on ‘Tapping the Potential of Non-Traditional Livelihoods to

At the GCE side event, Jose Roberto (Robbie) Guevara, Vice President (Asia Pacific), ICAE, and former ASPBAE President, facilitated an inter-regional sharing of CSO engagement in the VNR processes and CSO reports on the right to education in VNR countries.
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Empower Women and Girls. Thea spoke at the event and ASPBAE drew from the outcomes of its study on ‘Policy and Financing Options for Skills for Work of Marginalised Women’ focused on the experience in India and Indonesia. Meenu Vadera, CEO of Azad Foundation and ASPBAE Executive Council Member representing South and Central Asia, observed that, “Encouraging women to participate in non-traditional livelihoods (NTL) trainings is one of the only ways to pave the way for jobs that pay well and offer room for growth especially for marginalised women.” She reminded of the call of civil society for governments to “Implement education and skills development on NTL that help women and adolescent girls break stereotypes related to gender, caste, class, religion, sexual orientation, disability and other forms of marginalisation and oppression.”

An ASPBAE perspective

Significant discourse and commitment at the HLPF 2019 focussed on youth and youth participation in sustainable development and inclusion for persons with disabilities. Strong concern was expressed for climate issues and sustainability of livelihoods. There were also many useful suggestions for improvement, including making better use of regional institutions and fora; focusing on interlinkages between goals; and ministerial declarations that capture the discussions of the annual Forum and identify follow-up action.

Like many of the NGOs that participated, in the end, ASPBAE was concerned that the 2019 HLPF did not have a negotiated outcome which focused in-depth on the specific SDGs under review: SDGs 4, 8, 10, 13, 16, and 17. A Political Declaration focused on the next 10 years of SDG implementation was instead discussed for adoption in the September SDGs Summit. This took away from the more exhaustive consideration given to specific SDGs that was possible in earlier HLPFs and thus blunted...
attention to SDG4 and the other SDGs of the HLPF 2019 review process for example on decent work, inequality, climate action, and peace.

This is why ASPBAE was in full support of the effort taken by the CSO contingent in the HLPF 2019 under the Major Groups and Other Stakeholders (MGOS) in releasing its own Outcomes Document of the HLPG 2019.

On SDG4 in particular, the MGOS Outcomes Document decried the persistent barriers to the right to education through the life course. Noting that education is a fundamental human right and a public good, its centrality to achieving all other SDGs, and its role as a catalytic tool for social justice and democracy, the MGOS called upon governments to adopt a whole-sector and life-long learning approach to SDG4, including early childhood, adult, non-formal, and technical and vocational education and training. They called for government to ensure safe and gender-sensitive learning environments, well-supported and qualified teachers, a curriculum devoted to the full development of the human-being, including education for sustainable development and climate justice, human rights and equality, and peace, also within the context of the digital revolution. Finally, they demanded of governments to invest the maximum of resources available in quality public inclusive education, ending austerity, abolishing direct and indirect costs of education, delivering on tax justice and aid commitments, refraining from unsustainable borrowing, while stopping privatisation and commercialisation of education.

ASPBAE was intensely engaged in asserting its positions at these various platforms at the HLPF 2019. Kudos to ASPBAE staff for working around the clock in the lead-up to and during the event, for tirelessly advocating for youth and adult education and lifelong learning, and for being champions for quality education in a significant global platform!

Click here to read a series of ASPBAE blogs during the HLPF 2019. You can also follow ASPBAE on Facebook and Twitter to read social media postings during the event.

This article draws from blogs released during the HLPF 2019, including by ASPBAE President, Nani Zulminarni, and Jose Roberto (Robbie) Guevara, Vice President (Asia Pacific), International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) and former ASPBAE President. Some information was also drawn from the DVV International and UNESCO websites