



Asia South Pacific Association
for Basic and Adult Education
Learning Beyond Boundaries



Voluntary National Report (VNR) 2017 review

From ALE (Adult Learning and Education)

Perspective from India

The SDG's have been adopted in the year 2015, with the aim of achieving its 17 Goals and 169 targets. These seek to build on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the year 2030. Several review tools have also been provided to the participant countries. As the UN Secretary –General pointed out, “The success of the review system will ultimately be determined by its ability to help translate the Agenda into a nationally owned vision and objectives, leading to transformative action. This can only happen if reviews building on existing structures draw on contributions from all stakeholder groups.”¹ One of these includes the Voluntary Nation Report (VNR) which each of the nation state chooses to submit at the high level meeting each year. Guidelines for the same have also been shared with each of the participant country. The Indian State has been a strong supporter of implementing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The VNR 2017 of India claims that “India has played an important role in shaping the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This has meant that the country's national development goals are mirrored in the SDGs. As such, India has been effectively committed to achieving the SDGs even before they were fully crystallized.” The report also adds that the NITI Aayog is the nodal agency for implementing SDG's in the country by working with relevant ministries such that the goals are achieved by 2030.

The report goes on to claim that “While targeting economic growth, infrastructure development and industrialization, the country's war against poverty has become fundamentally focused on social inclusion and empowerment of the poor.” The report notes that India has adopted several massive scale anti-poverty programmes mostly for the disadvantaged communities; it also claims that programmes are also being implemented for ensuring education, health and nutrition security, with a special focus on vulnerable groups such as women and children.

Despite making the lofty claims of war against poverty, major socio-economic indicators of health and education which make up for the human capital of a country and their effects on the larger

population are missing from the report. India is on the verge of becoming country with the largest population in the world, with largest population of youth entering workforces in the world. Yet it is also a place of unspeakable deprivations which are getting deepened due to lackadaisical policy measures which are focusing on privatization and the economic growth of a few. The World Development Report 2019 by the World Bank² suggests that “[...] developing countries will need to take rapid action to ensure they can compete in the economy of the future. They will have to invest in their people with a fierce sense of urgency especially in health and education, which are the building blocks of human capital to harness the benefits of technology and to blunt its worst disruptions.” The Human Capital Index (HCI) of the World Bank measures the productivity of the next generation of workers relative to the benchmark of complete education and full health. As of 2018, out of HCI of 157 countries India was placed at 115 with an index of 0.44. Other countries such as Ghana, Zimbabwe and Solomon Islands have the same index as that of India.

This low HCI of India can be substantiated with enough evidence of low levels of education and health indicators of India. Out of a population of 1,350,438,098; the urban literacy rates in the adult age which is categorized as 15 years and above persons is at 82.8% (M= 88.3%, F= 76.9%) while in rural areas in the same age group is quite low at 62.6%. The education indicators deplete further when one talks about the women, especially rural women from marginalised communities. The Global Education Monitoring Report, 2014 (GEM) states that 37% of the world's non-literate individuals are in India. The report also suggests that 280 millions of these are just women.³ Literacy rates among the marginalised sections of the society are abysmally low. The literacy rate of 15+ years of rural women among Muslim women is 47.25%, 43% for SC women and a mere 37.05% for ST women.⁴

If such trends continue, it is estimated that rural women will be able to achieve 100% literacy only by 2080⁵. If this is true then India will miss out on its target of achieving 100% literacy by a humongous

¹<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/15836india.pdf>

²<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/816281518818814423/2019-WDR-Report.pdf>

³Teaching and Learning : Achieving quality for all, 2014. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000232205>

⁴Census of India : Towards a bright future, 2011 <http://censusindia.gov.in/>

⁵Teaching and Learning : Achieving quality for all, 2014. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000232205>

margin of 50 years. The low literacy rates directly translate to low numbers of women in workspaces. There is only 3.4% participation of women in the skilled work force; the work force participation of rural women from marginalised communities is at a 10-year low, only 27% from ST communities, 17.4% from SC communities and 15.3% rural women from Muslim communities participate in the work force⁶. On the other hand, budgets for the national scheme to incentivise secondary education for girl children and budgets in the “Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao” for the Scheduled Tribe girls have been reduced⁷.

India submitted its last VNR in the year 2017. The issues that were to be covered in this review included Governance, Health, Gender, Agriculture & Food Security, Poverty Eradication, Industrial Development, Oceans & Coasts, Economics & Investment, Stakeholder Participation, Monitoring & Evaluation, National Action, Follow-Up and Review⁸. The goals to be covered this year were SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 14 and 17. One of the core principals of the review processes as given in the guidelines of 2017 is “People- centered, gender-sensitive, and respect, protect and promote human rights, with a particular focus on the people who are poorest, most vulnerable and left furthest behind”. It has also been shared that the countries have to acknowledge that the targets don't stand independently in silos but instead are interconnected. This would imply that the country is obliged to show their progress on all the socio-economic indicators, the human capital instead of the ones specifically taken up in the report. This would mean that the country's progress on education, health, poverty, employment, economy etc have to be given equal prominence.

The purpose of this review is thus to understand the VNR 2017 of India from the perspective of Adult Education and Learning (ALE). This is based on the aforementioned idea that all the SDG goals and their targets don't function in silos but instead are interlinked to each other. The ability of the country to establish these interlinkages is crucial for attaining SDG goals by 2030. In this review, we will be specifically looking at the need of education of adults in India's attainment of the SDG's by 2030. As

per UNESCO, Adult learning and education (ALE) can help tackle pressing economic, social and environmental challenges. Yet, too many adults still lack adequate learning opportunities⁹. This review will look at some of the themes mentioned in the Guidelines to Support Country Reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals 2017. Thus, the review would look at Poverty Eradication, Gender, and monitoring and evaluation from ALE perspective.

To begin with, the 2017 VNR was the first review report submitted by India. As mentioned earlier, even though this report does not look at SDG 4 which specifically deals with education but this does not mean that the review can go without talking about education. Even Goals 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 14 and 17 which were to be covered in VNR have interlinkages with education as mentioned in their targets and indicators. For instance, Goal 1.a.2 talks about the need for government spending on essential services such as education, health and social protection. Similarly, when Goal 5 demands for women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life (Goal 5.5), it is not possible without basic levels of education. At the same time promoting food security (Goal 2), providing access to enabling technology for women (Goal 5.b) will not be effective if they are only formal in nature, in the form of a few subsidies and entitlements. For people from marginalised communities to fully access their rights and entitlements to the fullest, their basic rights which are necessary for dignified survival need to be addressed.

Despite these evident interlinkages made between the SDG goals covered in VNR 2017 and education is unmistakable. Yet overall, the Indian VNR only talks about primary education and skill development of youth. This is clearly visible from the VNR 2017 report where the word literacy is mentioned only once, the term education is mentioned twice and terms such as adult education and Adult Learning and Education (ALE) fail to find even a mention in the report. As mentioned earlier, the review will look at the few themes which would capture the essence of ALE.

⁶ Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)/Annual Report, 2017-18

http://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Annual%20Report%2C%20PLFS%202017-18_31052019.pdf

⁷ Thomas, K. (2017). Leave no child behind. In Promises & Reality

⁸ <https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Guidelines-to-Support-Country-Reporting-on-SDGs-1.pdf>

⁹ <http://uil.unesco.org/adult-education>

Poverty Eradication

The VNR starts with SDG Goal 1 on Poverty Eradication, it goes on to say under the section “Past Poverty Reduction”; “Rapid growth (SDG 8) is the key weapon in any country's arsenal to combat poverty. On the one hand, it creates well-paid jobs, which place necessary purchasing power in the hands of households to access food, clothing, housing, education and health. On the other, it brings ever-rising revenues to the government to finance social spending.”

Development translates as Economic growth for the policy narrative in India. Terms such as “sabka saath, sabka vikas” which can be roughly translated as “Collective Effort, Inclusive Development” have been vociferous in the Indian mainstream. This narrative is negating the fact that access to education, health, food, clothing and housing should not be offsets of well paying jobs. These are in fact the basic rights and entitlement of an individual to live a sustained life and to have the human capital to have a well-paying job. This has been also talked about in SDG 8.6 which states that in order to achieve economic growth “By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training’. Thus, establishing the earlier fact that SDGs cannot be achieved, unless basic needs of education and health are fulfilled.

Thus, the State policies such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MANREGA) and Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana might seem ideal for rural India; where the former aims at providing legal guarantee of 100 days of employment and latter on providing livelihoods opportunities for the marginalized communities in rural areas. The report claims that women and the disadvantaged communities have been its biggest beneficiaries'. One of the objectives of the latter scheme is to ensure that one female member from poor households in rural areas are part of a Self Help Group (SHG). The policies claim to be beneficial for the target population, without delving into the fact that studies have proven beyond doubt that SHGs increase the burden of loan on women while control over money remains with families and men in the house. It is also advocated by the civil society for long in India that, unless women in SHGs are linked with education; they would not be able to explore their capabilities to the fullest potential and can never become independently self sustainable. As we all understand that education means higher skills which translate as higher wages, lack of emphasis on it in the poverty alleviation strategies clearly shows a lack of long term vision by the policy makers in making its population attain their basic rights and entitlements.

Gender Equality



This review will also include discussion on gender while talking about India VNR 2017 from ALE perspective. In the past decade the number of policies aimed at empowerment of women has increased substantially. However, the increase in number of policies doesn't directly translate into empowerment of women. In the recent past social media gimmicks and superficial initiatives have taken over the space of women empowerment which does little to nothing for the up-liftment of women.

The VNR 2017, while talking about a study on Gender and Livelihoods Impact mentions “[...] women spend approximately 374 hours every year collecting firewood. This amount of time could otherwise be spent in education or productive work.” The response to this has been the Ujjwala Yojana which aims at providing women with “free” cooking gas. The very premise of this policy is rooted in the patriarchal mindset of the policy makers, where women are being showcased as selfless individuals who are preparing a meal for the entire

family in the magnanimous advertisement campaigns for this scheme. Instead, if the policy makers had shifted their priority to the 280 million women who are still non-literate, it would have gone a long way in changing the workforce participation women which is big concern currently with a falling rate of women's participation in paid workforce. The statistics of non-literacy among women especially those from marginalised communities are abysmal. 4 States with the lowest female Schedule Caste literacy rate; Bihar: 38.5% (Rural-37.4%); Jharkhand: 44.2% (R-40.8%); Rajasthan: 44.6% (R-41.4%); Uttar Pradesh: 48.9% (R-47.3%). At the same time, four States with some of the lowest female Schedule Tribe literacy rate include; Rajasthan: 31% (R-29%); Bihar: 33% (R-32%); Andhra Pradesh: 35% (R-34%); Uttar Pradesh: 36% (R-34%). Among these, rural tribal women from Garasia communities in Rajasthan have literacy rates as low as 19% and Saharia communities in Madhya Pradesh literacy rates as low as 32%.¹⁰

¹⁰http://www.aspbae.org/userfiles/july19/spotlight/INDIA_Spotlight_Report_on_SDG_4_2019.pdf

It is crucial to understand that this should not be an, and/or situation, where women are either provided with cooking gas subsidy or adult education. Both are crucial, but painting a household issue as women's issue does not do justice to the essence of the SDGs and the women's movement at large which has struggled for several years that women's basic needs are beyond their kitchens.

Similarly, passing off social media gimmicks such as 'selfie with daughter' shows that either the policy makers have very little to show as achievements in terms of providing gender equality or shows a lack of long term vision of the policy makers on achieving the SDGs. There should have been evidences of social upliftment of women which the larger policy "Beti Bachao Beti Padhao" intended to achieve. However, what the country is left with is a social media gimmick and 56% of the policy's intended budgetary allocation being spent on advertising.

This is indeed alarming when on the one hand, India has been able to increase the enrollment rate at primary level; the total gross enrollment rate (GER) is at an impressive 99.2% as of 2015-16.¹¹ However, given that, till now 39% of the total population of the country is out of school, which is highest in the world, it is evident that there is a huge population of the country which doesn't have access to formal education. These drop-out children, in their adolescence and youth now are not getting any opportunity to come to education or training or learning in later stages of their lives. This has left the country in a situation where 280 million of its citizens are non-literate which is highest in the world.

Thus, when the policy makers claim they are focusing on primary education and girls' education, where adult education is absolutely neglected both in terms of policy interventions and budget allocations, it denies basic right to education to more than 30% of its population currently. Programmes such as Mahila Samakahya which were developed solely for increasing the education levels

of rural adult women from marginalised communities have been closed down. Other programmes such as the Saakshar Bharat program have also not seen the light of day since their closure in 2015. Programmes such as Mahila Samkahya and Saakshar Bharat were the only programmes aimed at the adult population of the country. The overall budgetary allocations for education has also reduced tremendously where a mere 2.7% of the total union budget of 2018-19, have been allocated to education. This goes further down with only 74.5 crore (for an estimated 280 million non-literate population) have been allocated to adult education program, namely Padhana Likhna Abhiyan. This is the current adult education programme mentioned in some government documents of government of India with no clarity about when was it launched, to what purpose and with how much budget. Even while writing this report the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), the ministry which looks after education of India finds a mention of this policy with no other details available to scrutinize.

Other 'women-centric' policy measures that the policy makers have claimed to adopt are increasing women participation in Self Help Groups (SHGs), providing ration cards to female members etc. These policies are again far from the actual benefits and wellbeing of women. It has been long proven that SHGs have for long become a space where women are supposed to take loans for their family members and the responsibility to repay them also falls on the women with increasing burden of work on their shoulders. Millions of women are being collectivized under National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) in the form of SHGs, but unfortunately these collectives have become just the conduits of providing loans to the families with no linkages of education. Clearly these spaces could have been easily used to provide basic literacy skills to women with minimum human and financial resources but due to lack of motivation and lack of vision of policy makers, women's needs of education and learning are fading in the corner.

¹¹https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics-new/ESAG-2018.pdf

ALE from lifelong learning approach

We live in times defined and shaped by digital access and information. The world is changing rapidly with rapid change in technology and its usage in every aspect of people's life. In order to deal with challenges of this rapidly changing world, individual should not only have access to the digital spaces, but they should have access in a way that is empowering for them. Familiarity and functional knowledge of digital mediums has become an essential competency for accessing the entitlements and employment in day today life. Earlier, in 90s the emphasis was on 3R's (reading, writing and arithmetic), in last 10 years there's a shift and emphasis on reading and writing with comprehension, applying in their daily lives work which implies writing and reading through digital platforms. It is also important to acknowledge that in the contemporary world, digital is the most powerful medium that is influencing lives of people in a fundamental way. It has thus become more important than ever before to keep lifelong learning as the larger idea within adult learning and education.

Seeing this rapid growth of digital mediums and the internet; Goal 4 of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) which talks about providing quality education to all has the specific indicator "4.4.1 Proportion of youth and adults with information and communications technology (ICT) skills, by type of skill"¹². UNESCO is demanding for 'Internet Universality' for all. Having said this, India is also turning into a major player in the information and communications technology. It is estimated that by 2021, there will be about 635.8 million internet users in the country.¹³ By 2017, urban India has estimated 295 million internet users and rural India has estimated 186 million internet users. Nevertheless, men have dominated this sphere with 71% participation and women take up only 29% of the space⁵. Addressing this growing demand, Indian state has also introduced policies to incorporate the increasing demand with Digital India and Skill India Programmes.

However, With a country of 34.54%¹⁴ non-literate women and only 29% of the women using digital space we are steadily heading towards a time of new form of illiteracy, i.e. digital illiteracy. As Anita Gurumurthy¹⁵ puts it "Digital is the new grammar, if

we are not acquainting women with this new knowledge, in next 20 years to come, we will again be faced with a new community of non literates and marginalized i.e. digital illiteracy and marginalization." But sadly all the interventions by government and non - government initiatives to provide digital literacy in India are either inventing new ways of making non-literate (mainly men) learn technology or they are just leaving them out (mainly women) altogether. While it is appreciable that at least some efforts are made to reach out to non-literate population, the access and utility of digital mediums for these populations will always be very limited promoting the consumption of technology to benefit the market forces. Thus literacy has assumed new meaning and form in the lives of rural non-literate populations, especially women.

All efforts by government and non government organizations to promote livelihood such as micro-finance and entrepreneurship are also dependent a lot of people's ability to handle digital mediums and navigate technology to their advantage. However, while non-literate men somehow manage to deal with these new challenges due to their exposure and mobility in public sphere, women are completely at loss due to lack of literacy coupled with lack of ability to navigate digital and technology lead platforms and mediums.

We also see that in the last one decade digital tools have become part of the discourse of employability and skill training in small towns and semi urban areas. While this phenomenon is exciting, as is the increasing numbers of young women accessing training in these new technologies (DTP skills in particular), a digital divide is still visible in the access and usage of traditional and new media. Women's engagement especially of those from marginalized and rural poor communities remains limited with new media. Men and women with low literacy or no literacy or formal certification becomes doubly disadvantageous due to their inability to access programmes and schemes providing digital training and skills. In nutshell even those who may not technically fall under non literate population category are also disadvantaged if they do not get opportunity to upgrade their skills as per the contemporary needs and demands to become employable.

¹² United Nations, General Assembly, Global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/71/313 (6 July 2017) available from <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/>

¹³ Internet & Mobile Association of India (IAMAI). (2018, February 20). Press release. New Delhi, India. Retrieved from IAMAI Media.

¹⁴ Census Population 2015 Data(2015). Literacy in India. Retrieved September 10, 2018, from Census 2011: <https://www.census2011.co.in/literacy.php>

¹⁵ Anita Gurumurthy is a founding member and executive director of IT for Change, where she leads research collaborations and projects in relation to the network society, with a focus on governance, democracy and gender justice. Her work reflects a keen interest in southern frameworks and the political economy of Internet governance and data and surveillance. Anita engages actively with policy makers, practitioners, social movements' activists and the academic community to expand and deepen conversations on the public policy imperatives of the intertwining of the digital in all spheres of life.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The VNR 2017 mentions “India appreciates that tracking the SDGs effectively will require mechanisms to be established for generating a set of data that is broader, more disaggregated and available at shorter intervals of time as compared to the data that is currently utilized for reviewing development efforts. Disaggregated data is vital as it enables the formulation of effective policies for targeting specific disadvantaged groups and geographical areas in the country.” These sentences resonate with the fact that data is required to show evidences of what is working for an education policy of the country. However, as of 2019, most of the recent national reports on demographics, labour, crime, employment, education are missing from the mainstream. In the politics of convenience, to subvert the actual figures from coming out, national reports such as the Periodic Labour Force Survey Report (PLFS) July 2017- June 2018 was not released up until, July of 2019. The civil society and other stakeholders have to work with obsolete figures of the status of the marginalised communities. This report in particular states that the employment rate

of workers, especially women is at an all time low. Unemployment rate is at a high of 45 years.

These are just a few examples of lack of availability of data due to which true picture of the citizens especially those living at the periphery of the society is missing. This is also the reason why civil societies are working with 4 year old obsolete data which is not representative of the true picture of the society. The situation in reality is much worse; since the economy of the country has been hit in the recent years and the budgetary allocation for cardinal human capital have been reduced tremendously. This has particularly hit the adult education sector since it is anyway at the bottom of priority and is not actively demanded by the community or affected populations. However a welfare state, like government of India is not expected to act as per the demands of the community but strategize in accordance with the human rights assured through constitution, human rights convention and SDGs frameworks that India is committed to follow.

Conclusion

Given the tumultuous relation between education and the policies, the fate of Indian citizens hangs by a thin thread. Even though, India has the largest youth population but without the required push by the State and policy makers, the true potential of the people is yet to be discovered. Till the time, the basic necessities such as health care facilities and education of good quality including for those whose were left out during their childhood do not reach to all the citizens of the country and no one is left behind, the women and members of the

marginalized communities would continue to engage in undignified unskilled labour. Poverty eradication will continue to remain a slogan and dignified life for all will remain a dream. Education is the key to breaking the shackles of the power structures constructed by the society and the State has to design and invest in policies and programmes to promote and realize the framework of lifelong learning and Adult Learning and Education for all so that all can reap the benefits of economic growth.

About ASPBAE

The Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) is a regional association of more than 200 organisations and individuals working towards promoting quality education for all and transformative and liberating, lifelong adult education and learning. It strives to forge and sustain an Asia-Pacific movement dedicated to mobilising and supporting community and people's organisations, national education coalitions, teachers' associations, campaign networks, and other civil society groups and institutions in holding governments and the international donor community accountable in meeting education targets and commitments, ensuring the right of all to education, and upholding education as an empowering tool for combating poverty and all forms of exclusion and discrimination, pursuing sustainable development, enabling active and meaningful participation in governance, and building a culture of peace and international understanding. ASPBAE publications form an integral part of ASPBAE's information, education, and advocacy activities and efforts, and seek to support sharing and learning among education stakeholders, advocates, practitioners, analysts, and policymakers. The reader is therefore encouraged to write to ASPBAE if they wish to use the material contained herein for reproduction, adaptation, and translation and to provide feedback that could help in further improving these publications.



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