



Rethinking acceleration and transformation: Preferred approaches to education policy among Global South governments and experts

Southern Voice Secretariat

Key messages



International development policy aims to resolve the current learning crisis by accelerating action and transforming education systems. However, accelerating without first considering other transformative approaches could hinder sustainable education reform.



To prevent this, this policy brief proposes the 'sustainable transformation framework' which includes the alternative approaches of reflection, reimagination, and redirection.



We apply the framework to analyse national statements presented by Global South countries at the 2022 Transforming Education Summit (TES), and a survey of Southern education experts.



Our findings show policymakers and education experts to be aligned in favouring accelerating the building of schools and the integration of digital learning, and reflecting on the design of curricula that meet today's needs. There were diverse views on the preferred approach to reforming the teaching profession.



Despite acceleration proving popular, the other transformative approaches were also favoured across various sectors. Stakeholders should therefore allocate resources to charting an evidence-based path for the sustainable transformation of national education systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a turning point for education. On the one hand, there are growing calls to accelerate interventions in order to recover learning lost during the pandemic (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2022). On the other hand, the pandemic has exposed systemic weaknesses, created new challenges, and widened existing inequalities, prompting calls for the transformation of education systems (United Nations [UN], 2021). Ahead of the fast-approaching deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a tension appears to have emerged between strategies of acceleration and transformation. While acceleration involves hastening towards predetermined Goals, transformation calls for pause, and for current approaches to be reassessed to accommodate a host of present and future risks (United Nations, 2021). Therefore, with less than a decade remaining to achieve SDG 4 (quality education), policymakers now face a choice between straightforward acceleration, and making more transformative decisions. The UN will hold a Summit of the Future in 2024, prior to which it is imperative that Member States assess which approaches to achieving SDG 4 will yield the most sustainable development in the education sector.

This policy brief introduces the 'sustainable transformation framework' as a tool for the design and evaluation of transformative policy across the Global South. This framework proposes reflection, reimagination, and redirection as alternative approaches to be considered before acceleration. The application of this

framework is demonstrated in an analysis of the National Statements of Commitment presented by low- and lower-middle income countries from the proceedings of the 2022 Transforming Education Summit (TES)—which brought together over 130 countries "to accelerate progress towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4" (United Nations, 2021, p. 40)—to examine how policymakers and their visions have swayed. The brief similarly analyses the results of a survey of education experts in the Global South, carried out by Southern Voice ahead of the TES.

Specifically, this brief asks: To what extent has the concept of "transformative education" been reflected in the TES? And to what extent are national commitments aligned with the directions prioritised by the network of Southern Voice experts? In this way, through the lens of the proposed framework, we seek to explore how policymakers may best position their countries for a meaningful, sustainable transformation in education.

■ **With less than a decade remaining to achieve SDG 4, policymakers now face a choice between straightforward acceleration, and making more transformative decisions.** ■

The brief begins by unpacking the tensions surrounding acceleration and transformation in education. Next, it introduces the 'sustainable transformation framework', outlines the methodology used, and presents the findings. Finally, we discuss the conclusions drawn and present our policy recommendations for action.

■ Tensions between acceleration and transformation

Recognising the deleterious effects of COVID-19 on education, TES 2022 emerged as one of the key proposals from the UN Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda (UN, 2021) report. However, closer analysis suggests that the report outlines two competing priorities for education. The first priority is acceleration, specifically "to help children and young people to catch up on the learning lost during the pandemic," while the second priority urges countries to commit to "transforming education systems" so students can reach their full potential (UN, 2021, p. 40). This conflict can also be seen in the Vision Statement of the Secretary-General on Transforming Education, one of the key outputs from the Transforming Education Summit. Here, the Secretary-General re-emphasises the importance of acceleration, stating that "our first task is swift and targeted action to recover the learning losses inflicted by the pandemic" (UN, 2022, p. 2). However, he dedicates the majority of his statement towards rethinking the purpose of education for the 21st century, arguing that "there can be no going back to the education models of the past" (UN, 2022, p. 2). As such, countries "must reimagine education systems and raise the status of education" as part of a transformative agenda for education (UN, 2022, p. 2).

Given the time constraints of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, effectively tackling the learning crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic requires careful balancing of the competing priorities of acceleration and transformation. The following sections unpack the concepts of acceleration and transformation as well as their implications for education.

A critique of acceleration

This policy brief defines an accelerated approach to development as one that applies a burst of physical and human resources to reach deadline-driven goals. There are parallels between our definition of acceleration in education and the Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP) approach, which featured small-scale, time-bound interventions implemented across the Global South (Longden, 2013; Myers & Pinnock, 2017). While an accelerated approach might seem appealing in light of the fast-approaching 2030 deadline, there are concerns about the sustainability and feasibility of this model for education systems as a whole. Education

systems across the Global South are underpinned by complex and evolving political economic challenges, and many have so far largely failed to equip students with basic foundational skills. Therefore, it is unclear whether these systems have the capacity to support and maintain an accelerated approach to SDG 4.

Research shows that improving learning outcomes at scale is not straightforward, as it involves tackling the technical and political complexities which shape education systems and reforms (Hickey & Hossain, 2019; Pritchett, 2015; Shrestha et al., 2019). Consequently, simply accelerating current practices, or recreating the 'education models of the past,' risks reproducing or exacerbating existing deficiencies and inequalities in education systems. Hence, a transformative approach may be more appropriate, whereby policymakers are encouraged to reassess educational models, in a bid to channel resources more effectively and help steer education systems onto a more favourable course. Such nuance is especially important when the countries at the heart of these proposals are presently 'far off track' in terms of achieving international commitments on education (UNESCO, 2019).

Championing a transformative approach to education

The transformative approach to education described in this policy brief argues that it is important to assess whether to reflect, reimagine or redirect present efforts, before considering the option of acceleration. This approach builds on the work of the International Commission on the Futures of Education, which defined transformation

as the introduction of "fundamental changes to educational processes and opportunities worldwide" (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2022, p. 1). It was also informed by consultations with education experts in the Global South, who identified a range of areas in which other approaches needed to be implemented before acceleration could be considered. In contrast to the time-bound commitments of acceleration, transformation is "an intergenerational project that leads us to something that is both new and a renewal" (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2022, p. 1). Ultimately, a transformative approach involves identifying "[what] should continue, what should be abandoned, and what needs to be creatively reimaged afresh" (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2022, p. 1). Incorporating these elements of continuation, abandonment, and reimagination allows us to break the concept of transformation down into a series of practical approaches, to form the new 'sustainable transformation framework' presented below.

■ **Effectively tackling the learning crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic requires careful balancing of the competing priorities of acceleration and transformation.**



■ **Table 1.** The 'sustainable transformation framework' for transformative policymaking

Approach	Definition
Reflection	Considering what has been done so far and how it has worked, in order to devise new solutions as needed.
Reimagination	Rethinking the current framing and goals of the SDG 4 target, or the target itself, based on new information, tools, and other extenuating circumstances.
Redirection	Changing the way the SDG4 target is currently being implemented in order to meet the end goal(s).
Acceleration	Building on existing, successful efforts (scaling up, new phase, etc.) to achieve the SD4 target.

Note. Original data elaborated by authors from diverse sources

Although acceleration can be beneficial, an accelerated approach is only helpful when there is evidence to show that present efforts yield positive results. In addition, the multifaceted effects of the pandemic on education cannot be ignored, and must be taken into account despite the impending deadline for the SDGs. Taking the time to determine when to accelerate and when to adopt another approach is at the heart of a transformative approach to education. This brief examines the approach of policymakers across the five thematic action tracks of the TES. Following this analysis, the findings are compared to the results of a survey of think tank experts in education across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, to better understand how diverse stakeholders across the Global South have chosen to navigate the tension between acceleration and transformation within education.

■ **A review of national statements on transforming education**

A total of 38 countries were included in this review: twenty-eight from Africa, nine from Asia, and one from Latin America. The scope of the review was limited to statements written in either English, French or Spanish, and submitted by low- and lower-middle income countries from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where the transformation of education systems is particularly important in order to achieve the SDG on education.

This review asks: To what extent has the concept of “transformative education” been reflected in the TES? And to what extent are national commitments aligned with the directions prioritised by the network of Southern Voice experts?

Approach

To answer these questions, we carried out a thematic analysis of the National Statement of Commitments¹ presented at the TES, using the ‘sustainable transformation framework’ as an analytical tool (Table 2). Our approach to thematic analysis, following Braun & Clarke (2006), involved the repeated and active reading of policy documentation, followed by the deductive coding and interpretation of keywords and phrases associated with the analytical framework.

■ **Table 2. Analytical framework**

Theme	Definition	Key words/phrases ²
Reflection	Considering what has been done so far and how it has worked in order to devise new solutions as needed	"evaluation of students' learning level post-pandemic;" "take into account these new inequalities;" "fully understanding the current state of affairs;" pause; "reflect;" "planning"
Redirection	Changing the way the SDG4 target is currently being implemented in order to meet the end goal(s)	"change path;" "shift away from the current implementation, towards new activities;" "transfer resources from one goal to another;" "stop detrimental approaches"
Reimagination	Rethinking the current framing and goals of the SDG 4 target, or the target itself based on new information, tools, and other extenuating circumstances	"proposing new or adapted goals or targets based on the new information and tools we receive;" "reimagining the teaching profession as a whole and its place in society;" "respond to the needs of the future;" "creative thinking;" "envision;" "smarter investments;" "reimagining the place of schools in society"

1 See: <https://knowledgehub.sdg4education2030.org/NationalCommitment>

2 Key words and phrases were partly informed by the Secretary-General's "Vision Statement on Transforming Education," the survey of Southern Voice experts, and the flagship report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2022, p. 1).

Acceleration	Building on existing, successful efforts (scaling up, new phase, etc.) to achieve the SD4 target	Scaling; additional resources; expansion; "speed up action;" continuing with "existing approaches;" "right track;" "swift;" "rapid action"
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Note. Authors' own.

The findings of the review are discussed against the results of a survey carried out in August 2022 of 21 Southern Voice education experts from think tanks in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The purpose of the survey was to gather insights into how acceleration impacts on SDG target 4.1 to "by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes." This survey focused on basic education, since this sector is at the centre of the ongoing learning crisis where little to no progress has been made since 2015 (UNESCO-UIS, 2019). The survey proposed five determinants for achieving Target 4.1, namely: 1) increasing the supply of qualified teachers; 2) building and upgrading inclusive and safe schools; 3) reforming existing curriculum and pedagogical practices; 4) increasing the use of education technology; and 5) improving community-level awareness, advocacy and partnerships for girl-child education. Respondents were then asked to choose their preferred policy approach for each target, using the sustainable transformation framework outlined above. Respondents were also asked open-ended questions to elaborate further on their chosen approaches. The survey results also inform an article disseminated by Southern Voice, calling on global experts and policymakers to examine the concept of acceleration and its implications for education.³

■ Main findings

The review identified over 200 unique policy approaches towards the five thematic action tracks⁴ of the TES. Our analysis compares the findings of this review against the results of the Southern Voice expert survey.⁵ Results show that overall, acceleration is popular in both policy approaches and expert opinions, highlighting a sense of urgency as the 2030 deadline for the SDGs approaches. However, despite the popularity of acceleration, policymakers did not

³ See: <https://southernvoice.org/towards-transforming-education-summit-is-acceleration-the-right-approach/>

⁴ The five thematic action tracks are: schooling, curriculum, teaching, digitalization, and financing. For more information see: <https://www.un.org/en/transforming-education-summit/action-tracks>

⁵ Survey respondents were not asked about financing; therefore, no comparisons could be made concerning the fifth thematic action track.

adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. It was common for countries to articulate different approaches in a single area of intervention. Similarly, the survey showed that experts favoured a varied approach to the thematic action tracks.

Ultimately, these findings reflect the 'acceleration-transformation' dilemma facing education, as countries attempt to balance the need for speed with the desire to reflect, reimagine or redirect ongoing efforts amidst the global recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. What follows is a brief discussion of the dominant trends in approaches to each thematic action track.

Action track 1: Inclusive, equitable, safe, and healthy schools

Key approach: Acceleration.

Here, country commitments largely echo the opinions of our network's experts: vulnerable education systems across the Global South need to *accelerate the development of a basic school infrastructure*, fit to accommodate the demands of growing populations.

Half of the countries show an accelerated approach to this action track. It is particularly recommended in response to the COVID-19 pandemic within Asian countries. Several African countries also commit to accelerating ongoing efforts towards universal basic education. Malawi in particular outlines a quantitative goal of increasing primary enrolment from "90 to 100%" and of accelerating the construction of secondary schools to expand access.

The survey results echo this general approach, with 43% of survey respondents proposing an accelerated approach towards building and upgrading inclusive and safe schools. An expert from Kenya who supports acceleration states that "the growth in the number of pupils is not matched by the infrastructure." An expanding youth population across the African continent further contextualises the acceleration approaches of countries such as Cote d'Ivoire, which expresses a desire to 'intensify' the construction of local colleges in anticipation of an expected increase in primary school graduates.



Most countries studied opt for an accelerated approach to improve access to digital resources, digitalise the curriculum, and scale digital interventions introduced during the pandemic.



Action track 2: Learning and skills for life, work, and sustainable development

Key approach: Reflection.

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, national commitments and our experts' opinions alike point to the need for a reflective evaluation, particularly in relation to losses in learning and national development needs.

Results show that 57% of the national commitments examined adopt a reflective approach to learning and skills for life, work, and sustainable development. In Bangladesh, the government states that they had conducted a review of all policies, actions and activities of the last six years within the context of COVID-19 aimed at implementing and achieving the Global 2030 Agenda. Across Francophone Africa, leaders express plans to evaluate the extent of learning losses before deciding on the right course of action. For example, Djibouti sets out to conduct a "thorough evaluation" of "learning losses [...] motivation and overall psychological impact of the pandemic" to help inform further policy action.

The survey component corresponding to this action track concerns curriculum and pedagogical reform. The majority of respondents (52%) opt for reflection as their preferred approach. The alignment between policy and expert recommendation is captured most succinctly by the following quote from a respondent:

"Any reform in this context must satisfy both immediate and long-term goals (improving student learning outcomes and labour market participation and returns, respectively). In order to better equip students to address industry-specific needs, we must also assess market expectations and reimagine/design curriculum and pedagogy. This, like the execution of any other policy, must be founded on thorough evidence".

Action track 3: Teachers, teaching, and the teaching profession

Key approaches: Acceleration, reflection, and reimagination.

Acceleration and reimagination emerge as the most popular country approaches for this action track. In the survey, reflection (38%) and reimagination (24%) are the preferred approaches, with acceleration selected by only 19% of respondents.

In terms of acceleration, most countries express the desire to 'enhance' (Ghana), 'improve' (Cambodia and Sri Lanka) or 'strengthen' (Cape

Verde; Egypt; Kenya; and Liberia) the skills, capacity, and professionalism of teachers by investing additional resources in updating content knowledge, pedagogy, and the use of technology. Accelerating the supply of quality teachers is also prioritised by countries such as Egypt, Comoros, Sri Lanka and Malawi, with the latter striving to reach a teacher-pupil ratio of 1:45 for primary and 1:20 for secondary schools by the 2030 deadline. By contrast, survey respondents find acceleration to be the least helpful approach, with one expert stating that “the supply is not as much of a problem as equity in geographical distribution throughout the country.” While they agree on the importance of qualified teachers, the majority of respondents highlight instead the “need to reflect on the skills teachers are trained for.”

In relation to reimagination, the review finds that most countries are also committed to the reimagination of the teaching profession and the role of teachers within society in general. For example, Malawi commits to the “transformation of the teaching profession to make it prestigious, autonomous, trusted and accountable.” Similarly, Honduras seeks to “redefine the teaching career” by introducing permanent and quality continuous education for teachers. This sentiment is also shared by 24% of experts, with one urging policymakers to “reimagine/design the teacher training programs, screening and recruitment processes, pedagogical techniques [...] and produce a cohort of newly qualified teachers who can address the challenges that have arisen as a result of the prolonged school closures.”

Action track 4: Digital learning and transformation

Key approach: Acceleration

As well as consensus around the benefits of developing digital learning capabilities, both governments and Southern Voice experts also highlight the need to keep working towards an inclusive delivery of education on either side of the digital divide.

A clear majority of the countries studied (63%) opt for an accelerated approach to improve access to digital resources, digitalise the curriculum, and scale digital interventions introduced during the pandemic. For example, Lesotho seeks to “accelerate digital expansion across all levels” of schooling. This goal is equally shared by Cape Verde, Rwanda and Nigeria, with the latter seeking to leverage its ongoing digital transformation to reach children through a combination of online, offline, and mobile solutions. In Asia, Laos and the Philippines seek to improve access to digital learning resources, with the latter planning to “accelerate the construction of an ecosystem that provides inclusive, equitable and gender-responsive digital learning for all.”

Similarly, in the expert survey over 40% of respondents propose an accelerated approach to increasing the use of education technology. The three non-acceleration approaches each represent 19% of responses. Some comments in the survey propose that this intervention be expanded due to its relative success during the pandemic, while others warn that many will be left behind if other non-accelerated responses are not considered first. Nevertheless, this thematic action track sees the largest margins between accelerated and non-accelerated approaches across both the national statements and survey responses.

Action track 5: Financing of education

Key approach: Acceleration

Most countries adopt an accelerated approach towards the financing of education, with a focus on increasing national education budgets to meet or exceed the global minimum benchmark of 20% of current public expenditure. Countries such as Ghana and Liberia commit to achieving their respective targets of 23% and 20% by 2025. Meanwhile, the Francophone nations set more ambitious targets, with Burkina Faso building towards maintaining a 30% budget allocation for education from 2021 to 2025, and Cameroon seeking to progressively increase budget allocation for education to 42% by 2030. Nepal and the Philippines seek to achieve the minimum benchmark by 2030.

The survey did not contain corresponding information regarding financing of education.

■ Conclusion

Policymakers across the Global South outlined competing policy priorities during the Transforming Education Summit. Although acceleration emerged as a popular approach with policymakers and experts in different areas, they also favoured other transformative solutions. Most importantly, when it comes to key determinants for learning, such as curriculum and teaching, both experts and policymakers look to reimagining and reflecting approaches. In fact, many low- and middle-income countries have committed to largely qualitative targets which contradict the quantitative benchmarks of the fast-paced SDG 4 agenda. For example, under Track 3 (teaching), most countries saw a need to accelerate ongoing teacher training programmes to combat learning losses; however an equal number of countries also felt the need to reimagine and expand the role of the teachers beyond the classroom, recognising the potential of this to create long term intergenerational change.

Yet, current time-bound commitments relating to SDG 4 make it difficult to see how room may be made for both acceleration measures (for example, in relation to teacher training), and the transformation of the profession for the benefit of the education system in the long run. A transformational approach calls not only for the rethinking of education systems, but also the reconsideration of targets and perhaps their deadlines, especially if acceleration means speeding off in the wrong direction. Therefore, there is a need to pay closer attention to the extent to which the acceleration-transformation dilemma exists within national policies, to ensure that we champion the efforts that promote rather than undermine long lasting change.

■ Policy recommendations

The findings of the study give rise to three policy recommendations for consideration ahead of the Summit of the Future in 2024. The recommendations are tailored towards the follow-up activities outlined in the official TES report⁶ released following the Summit.

First, we recommend that the other transformational approaches in the 'sustainable transformation framework' are always considered before acceleration. Greater consideration must be given to the transformational actions of reimagination, reflection, and redirection within global calls for action on education. In particular, the data presented here point to the relevance of reimagination in relation to education systems in low- and middle-income countries, being—by only a small margin—the second most preferred approach overall. This policy brief has included empirical examples of transformative policy approaches articulated by Member States.

Second, as policymakers work to integrate national commitments into their education systems, the SDG 4 High Level Steering Committee (HLSC) should support low-and lower-middle income countries, both technically and financially, as they navigate the often conflicting priorities of acceleration and transformation. While there are clear benefits in adopting multiple strategies for education, the ability to pursue diverse strategies depends on the availability of resources. This severely limits the type of approach that low and middle-income countries are able to implement, especially if there is a lack of alignment between donors and recipient countries. The 'sustainable transformation

■ **Although acceleration emerged as a popular approach with policymakers and experts in different areas, they also favoured other transformative solutions.** ■

⁶ See: <https://knowledgehub.sdg4education2030.org/report2022>

framework' provides a helpful rubric to support the HLSC in following up on the transformative goals expressed by Member States. Thus, it may be used in the lead up to the Summit of the Future to shape a platform for national governments to—with adequate support, as outlined above—develop and articulate concrete proposals to achieve the transformations outlined in their commitments.

Finally, we must ensure that accelerated approaches are rooted in robust evidence. Therefore, both domestic and international financing should be mobilised towards strengthening the monitoring and evaluation capacities of Member States, incorporating the methodology proposed within this brief for the design, implementation, and evaluation of transformational policy. We must ensure that accelerated approaches are accompanied by reflection through greater support for research. Accelerating in the right direction requires evidence, and several countries have expressed the desire to reflect on current approaches. As we approach the 2030 deadline, we should not discount the importance of evidence at this critical time. It is vital that countries channel resources into developing their evaluative capacities, bolstering much-needed agility in the race to fulfil national commitments.

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Founded in 2013, Southern Voice is a network of think tanks from Africa, Asia and Latin America & the Caribbean. It contributes to the global dialogue on the UN [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). Southern Voice's ultimate aim is to address the existing 'knowledge asymmetry' and 'participation deficit' in the development dialogue. It does this by producing, promoting, and disseminating evidence-based policy analysis by researchers from Global South countries.

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