



Sustaining the Sustainable Development Goals





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By: Francis Isaac

A Question of Power

Achieving SDG 4 on Quality Education

On June 19, 2024, Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte announced her departure from the cabinet of President Bongbong Marcos by resigning as Secretary of the Department of Education (DepEd). Duterte did not offer any explanation for her decision, and simply thanked the Chief Executive “for the opportunity to have served as a member of (his) Cabinet.”¹

The Vice President's resignation came a day after the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) released a report that placed the Philippines at the bottom four of a global test for creative thinking. This placed the country in the same statistical range as Albania, Morocco and Uzbekistan—with 15-year-old Filipino students having a “mean score of 14 out of 60 possible points.”² Undertaken in 2022 and covering 64

countries, the assessment defined creative thinking as “the ability to generate, evaluate and improve ideas to produce original and effective solutions.”³

Previous PISA reports also highlighted the Philippine's dismal performance. In 2018, for example, the country landed at the bottom of the heap at 79th place, with 78 percent of Filipino students scoring below the minimum proficiency level for science, and 81 percent for reading and mathematics.⁴ Four years later, in 2022, the Philippines was ranked at 77th place among 81 participating countries, with the PISA report indicating that, “Compared to 2018, the proportion of students scoring below a baseline level of proficiency did not change significantly in mathematics, reading and science.”⁵

¹ Rappler (2024). “Look: VP Sara Duterte's Resignation Letter as DepEd Secretary, NTF-ELCAC Vice Chairperson.” June 19. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/397bxx7y>.

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024). *PISA 2022 Results Volume III: Creative Minds, Creative Schools—Factsheets (The Philippines)*. Paris; p. 2.

³ *Ibid.*; p. 9.

⁴ World Bank (2020). *PISA 2018 (Programme for International Student Assessment): Philippines Country Report*. Washington, DC; p. 1.

⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2023). *PISA 2022 Results: Factsheets (The Philippines)*. Paris; p. 2.

The results caught the attention of the Congressional Policy and Budget Research Department (CPBRD)—the policy think tank of the House of Representatives—noting that the performance in PISA is a good “indicator of the country's state of basic education” and highlights the need to take drastic measures “to improve performance in international assessment.”⁶

With these consistently poor figures, it is now uncertain if the country can achieve the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on Quality Education by 2030, especially since its 10 targets include substantially increasing the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship (4.4), and ensuring that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy (4.6).

DepEd, for its part, did not contest the results. It stated, instead, that the PISA reports reveal the country's five- to six-years lag in learning competencies. This was emphasized by Alexander Sualit, officer-in-charge of the Department's Bureau of Education Assessment, who said that, “If we follow the computation (of PISA) with caveats, based on the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) with socioeconomically advantaged students, we can see that (we) are around five to six years behind.”⁷

Pandemic Disruption

Education officials, however, were quick to point out that the poor results were a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted the government to suspend face-to-face classes for two years. As DepEd Undersecretary Michael Poa emphasized, “Definitely, the pandemic had an impact on why we are a bit stagnant because imagine, for two years, most of our children did not go to school.”⁸

Ironically, according to Poa, the Department was even pleased with the results because “somehow, the situation didn't get worse.”⁹ However, despite their optimism, DepEd cannot deny that the pandemic has taken a terrible toll on the country's 27 million learners.

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Image: www.i.ytimg.com



⁶ Congressional Policy and Budget Research Department (2024). “Philippines' PISA Performance in 2018 and 2022.” Facts in Figures, 11; p. 1.

⁷ Ines, Jezreel (2023). “PISA Result Indicates PH Education System is 5 to 6 Years Behind – DepEd.” Rappler. December 7. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/4hk3y8nk>.

⁸ Ombay, Giselle (2023). “VP Sara: PISA Score an 'Uncomfortable Truth' in PH Education.” GMA News. December 6. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/272k8y47>.

⁹ Ibid.

This was pointed out by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), noting that the prolonged class disruption has caused “children's ability to read, write and do basic mathematics (to) suffer.”¹⁰ The UN agency further observed that the lockdowns had placed the “development, safety and well-being (of students) at risk”, while depriving them of the “mental health, psychosocial support, and health and nutrition services offered by schools.”¹¹ Because of these extreme difficulties, the Social Weather Stations (SWS) estimates that 4.4 million Filipinos dropped out of school in late 2020.¹²

Learning Continuity

To address these challenges, DepEd came up with a package of policy interventions called the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP). Developed through a series of consultations with different stakeholders, the Plan was intended to “find ways for learning to continue” while

“ensuring the health, safety, and well-being of all learners, teachers, and personnel of the Department.”¹³ DepEd Order No. 12, Series of 2020, further described the BE-LCP as an “emergency measure” designed to assist learners, teachers and Department personnel to adjust to the realities of COVID-19. It did so by reducing the learning competencies of the K-12 curriculum by 60 percent, leaving only what the Department describes as the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs).

The Plan also identified distance learning as the main modality for delivering education services. Under this arrangement, learning was supposed to take place even though teachers and students were geographically remote from each other. But with only 48 percent of public schools connected to the internet, the Department relied heavily on the use of self-learning modules (SLMs) which were distributed and later collected from students, as well as television and radio-based instruction.

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Image: www.devpolicy.org



¹⁰ United Nations Children's Fund (2021). “Reopening Schools Safely in the Philippines.” September 20. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/32kt627t>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Social Weather Stations (2021). “Fourth Quarter 2020 Social Weather Survey on Learning Delivery Modalities (Part 1): 87% of School-Age Filipinos are Currently Enrolled in School, Mostly in Elementary and Through Modular Distance Learning.” February 24. Quezon City; p. 1.

¹³ Department of Education (2020). *Learning Opportunities Shall Be Available: The Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan*. Pasig City; p. 3.

In mid-2023, the BE-LCP was expanded into the National Learning Recovery Program (NLRP) to address the “learning loss heightened by school closures and disruptions during the COVID-19 Pandemic.” For this reason, DepEd Order No. 13, Series of 2023 instructed all teachers and Department personnel to address the learning gaps among learners by focusing on numeracy and literacy.

Civil Society Response

DepEd, however, concedes that its continuity and recovery effort is “not a perfect plan,” and that “operational complications” had to be expected along the way.¹⁴ With this admission, DepEd sought support from education stakeholders, emphasizing the need for “strengthened coordination and cooperation at national and local levels.”¹⁵

This prompted the creation of a new civil society initiative called Multiply-Ed (X-Ed) to monitor the implementation of the learning continuity and recovery plan of the Department of Education. Launched on February 7, 2022, X-Ed is now being implemented in 11 key areas of the country. These include Bulacan, Cebu, Cagayan de Oro, Cotabato, General Santos, Lanao del Sur, Naga City, Negros Occidental, Palawan, Pasig and Quezon City.

As its first major activity, X-Ed conducted a special monitoring of DepEd's pilot face-to-face classes in November to December 2021. This was a response to the Department's earlier statement on October 6 that the initial run of face-to-face classes will be from November 15, 2021 until January 31 of the following year.

The monitoring was held in 16 out of the 100 public schools that were part of the pilot. These included three schools in Zambales, another three in Albay, four schools in Cebu, three from Surigao del Norte, two in Metro Manila, and a lone school from Aklan.

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X-Ed's findings were later published in a document that was released in February 2022. In its report, Multiply-Ed stated that the schools covered by their special monitoring were “generally compliant” to the standards set by DepEd.¹⁶ However, the document also emphasized that “all schools had incidences of non-compliance.”¹⁷

To address these flaws, X-Ed issued the following recommendations to the Department of Education:

1. Tighten guidelines and nuance the standards for face-to-face classes.
2. Provide ample support and assistance to teachers.
3. Prioritize vaccination.
4. Allot adequate time for preparation.
5. Urgently address pre-existing issues and challenges, especially the challenges of complying with 1:1 textbook-student ratio and classroom shortage.
6. Promote openness to civil society monitoring initiatives.

Image: www.api.time.com



¹⁴ Ibid., P. 5.

¹⁵ Ibid., P. 4.

¹⁶ Multiply-Ed (2022). *Multiply-Ed Special Monitoring of DepEd's Pilot Run of Face-to-Face Classes*. Quezon City; p. 25.

¹⁷ Ibid., P. 25.

After releasing their findings, X-Ed organized a series of problem-solving sessions with DepEd officials. In a tweet, Multiply-Ed described these sessions “as an avenue to present accomplishments and recommendations to key duty-bearers from different divisions and regional offices.”

These were succeeded by five Regional Multi-Sectoral Conferences (RMSCs) that brought together more than 450 education stakeholders from Bicol, Cebu, Mindanao, Palawan and Metro Manila. Held from May to June 2023, the RMSCs were meant as “a follow-up engagement of X-Ed with division-level and regional-level duty-bearers to ensure the delivery of their commitments given during the problem-solving sessions.”¹⁸

The results of the RMSCs and problem-solving sessions were then consolidated into Multiply-Ed's Eight-Point Reform Agenda, which was later forwarded to the Department of Education. This Eight-Point Reform Agenda is composed of the following:

1. Increase education budget and ensure accountability in its spending and utilization to address learning gaps.
2. Expand psychosocial support and social welfare programs.
3. Improve the efficiency of the procurement process of infrastructure and educational materials in geographically-isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDA).
4. Strengthen the information system in education governance and support the urgent passage of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Bill.
5. Ensure an inclusive learning environment for students.
6. Ensure spaces for transparent, participatory, and accountable education governance.
7. Develop an effective, equitable, and learner-centric education.
8. Build a resilient and crisis-responsive education system.

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Image: www.manilatimes.net

¹⁸ Government Watch (2023). “Moving Up to Make Government Respond: Multiply-Ed Convenes 450 Education Stakeholders in 5 Regional Multi-Sectoral Conferences.” June 27. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/bdcr6evx>.

Ill-Suited Secretary

While Duterte did not reject any of these proposals, she also did not openly endorse X-Ed's Reform Agenda. This, of course, was hardly surprising since she hardly showed any interest in reforming the education sector. In fact, during her two-year stint as DepEd Secretary, Duterte's singular focus was on compelling all university and college students to render mandatory military service for two years, regardless of gender.

Under the current setup, every tertiary student is required to undergo civic and defense preparedness education for an academic period of two semesters through the National Service

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Image: tribune.net.ph



Training Program (NSTP). Though compulsory, students may choose among three programs for them to take. These are:

- the Civic Welfare Training Service (CWTS) that undertakes activities to improve the health, environmental and safety conditions of the community;
- the Literacy Training Service (LTS) that trains students to teach literacy and numeracy skills to school children and out-of-school youth; and
- the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), that provides students with basic military training and education.

If Duterte had her way, the first two options will no longer be available and students will simply be obliged to undertake at least two years of basic military training. In addition, the government would have to spend a whopping Php61.2 billion (US\$1.2 billion) for the first five years of its implementation.¹⁹

Duterte, however, saw nothing wrong with her push for mandatory ROTC, insisting that it was her role as DepEd Secretary to mold future citizens “who are disciplined and have love for the country, (and) Filipino youths who will help the government in forging and fortifying peace and progress in our country.”²⁰ It was a fairly reasonable assertion; but it also revealed a mindset that is better suited in the defense establishment than in the education sector.

To be fair to the Vice President, she made it explicitly clear months before the elections that she was eyeing the post of defense secretary, and even lobbied for the said portfolio with her running-mate Bongbong Marcos. She, however, was not designated as defense chief and was appointed to DepEd instead.

Unfortunately, the Vice President had very little involvement with the education sector and had (at best) a flimsy understanding of the challenges that it was facing. By accepting a cabinet post that she did not aspire for, Duterte was both ill-suited and ill-prepared to address the myriad of problems plaguing her department. As a consequence, Duterte's time in DepEd was largely mediocre, with very little accomplishment to speak of.

¹⁹ Magsambol, Bonz (2023). “If Mandatory ROTC Could Cost PH Govt' P61.2 Billion, Is it Worth It?” Rappler. February 8. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/363bmwhf>.

²⁰ Marcelo, Elizabeth (2022). “Mandatory Military Service? Sara Wants 'Patriotic' Youth.” One News. May 13. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3yh3aaeb>.



Image: www.manilatimes.net

“Duterte's time as head of the education department highlights the political aspect of the SDGs.

To make matters worse, her stint as Secretary became mired in controversy when in late 2022, Duterte asked Congress that the Department be given confidential funds amounting to Php150 million (US\$3 million).²¹ When asked for a reason, Duterte said that the funds will be used for security and surveillance to halt the recruitment of school children to the communist insurgency. In a congressional hearing, Duterte further defended her proposed budget, stating that “we need the help of the security cluster and the security sector to address these issues and challenges to basic education.”²²

This, however, generated considerable public outcry, forcing Duterte to issue a statement on November 9, 2023, announcing her decision to withdraw her request for confidential funds. Seven months later, Duterte finally left the education sector by stepping down as DepEd Secretary.

The Inevitability of Politics

Duterte's time as head of the education department highlights the political aspect of the SDGs. Though these 17 Goals have already been

adopted by 193 countries, they are not self-implementing and would require firm leadership if they are to be achieved. Those tasked with the nation's direction are, therefore, expected to be committed to the public interest, knowledgeable of the issues that they need to address, and competent in the execution of their responsibilities. Unfortunately, Duterte failed to meet any of these standards as education secretary.²³

In hindsight, it is now obvious that her appointment as DepEd chief was not because of her foresight or administrative competence. Rather, she was brought to the Department out of sheer political consideration. And this is extremely important in a country like the Philippines wherein politics is “built around dominant local political clans or warlords” due to the absence of strong and viable programmatic parties.²⁴

At the time of the election, Duterte was the mayor of Davao City and the daughter of then-outgoing President, Rodrigo Duterte. She, therefore, hails from one of the most powerful political dynasties in Mindanao.²⁵

²¹ At that same time, Duterte asked for a separate Php500 million (US\$10 million) in confidential funds for the Office of the Vice President (OVP).

²² Magsambol, Bonz (2022). “Security and Surveillance? Duterte Defends DepEd's P150 Million Confidential Funds.” Rappler. September 14. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/424k5mad>.

²³ Shortly after her appointment as DepEd Secretary, Duterte spent Php125 million (US\$2.5 million) in just 11 days. This reveals not only her profligacy but her utter lack of respect for taxpayers' money.

²⁴ Teehankee, Julio (2012). “Clientelism and Party Politics in the Philippines,” in *Clientelism and Electoral Competition in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines*. Dirk Tomsa and Andreas Ufen, eds. Oxford: Routledge; p. 208.

²⁵ Since assuming the vice presidency, Sara Duterte's youngest brother, Sebastian, succeeded her as mayor of Davao City. Her other brother, Paolo, on the other hand, has been a member of the House of Representatives since 2019.

Bombong Marcos, being the son and namesake of the former dictator, also comes from a prominent family. With his sister Imee in the Senate, his son Sandro in the Lower House, and his nephew Matthew Manotoc as provincial governor, Marcos enjoys considerable sway over the Ilocos region in the northern part of the Philippines.

Though a fairly strong presidential contender, a survey from polling firm Social Weather Stations in September 2021 showed Marcos trailing the race with 15 percent. To completely overwhelm the main opposition candidate Leni Robredo, Marcos had to forge an alliance with Sara Duterte to gain vote-rich Mindanao. And while Duterte has presidential ambitions of her own, she eventually agreed to be Marcos' running-mate, probably believing that the vice presidency would further consolidate her national profile and bring her one step closer to Malacañang.²⁶

With the Marcoses of the north joining forces with the Dutertes of the south to form the “UniTeam,” the two families were able to trap Robredo in a political pincer movement from which she was not able to escape. And since the elites generally see the state, not as a dispenser of public goods but as a source of political patronage, Duterte's DepEd post was the spoils that she received after the UniTeam's unprecedented election victory in 2022.

The SDGs as a Political Program

Of course, the SDGs cannot simply be reduced to politics, but neither can politics be ignored altogether. If the SDGs are to be achieved, then competent leaders should be given key government positions with substantive decision-making powers. Doing so entails elections, and elections are inherently political.

However, since 1907 when voting was first introduced in the country, Philippine elections have largely been dominated by a few elite families that were initially favored by the American colonial authorities.²⁷ Because elected elites view elections as simple battles for patronage, it is highly unlikely that the SDGs are high on their priority.

Fortunately, there are civil society initiatives such as X-Ed that are pushing for various education reforms that are critical in attaining SDG 4. The Student Council Alliance of the Philippines (SCAP) is another organization that is deeply

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Image: www.behance.net



involved in efforts to improve the country's education system. Composed of more than 150 student councils and student political parties across the Philippines, SCAP issued a statement in September 2021 calling on the government to immediately declare an “education crisis.”²⁸ A direct consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, SCAP cited a study by the National Research

²⁶ Malacañang is the official residence of the President of the Philippines.

²⁷ The Philippines was occupied by the United States for 48 years, from 1898 to 1946.

²⁸ Tan, Alyssa Nicole (2021). “Students, Youth Groups Call for Emergency Education Plan as School Year Opens. *Business World*. September 13. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/bdcsa4w8>.

Council of the Philippines which stated that 90 percent of students learned less under the previous remote learning set-up due to internet connection and the unfamiliarity of such arrangement.

The Alliance then reiterated its call nine months later, and urged the government to ensure the safe reopening of schools as well as the provision of accessible mental services for students, teachers and other school staff.²⁹

SCAP's advocacy efforts eventually bore fruit when in 2023, the government, through the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II), admitted that, "there is an education crisis in the country."³⁰ Composed of members from both the Senate and House of Representatives, and "tasked to undertake a comprehensive national assessment and evaluation of the performance of the education sector,"³¹ EDCOM II emphasized the importance of timely textbook disbursement and the need for continuous teacher training. It also encouraged education stakeholders from civil society to "critically engage with government, to provide ample checks and balance, to refine assumptions, to suggest solutions, and to be partners in implementation."³²

These developments indicate that by organizing around SDG 4, progressives have succeeded in prompting government to realize the situation and finally take action. It also a testament to the effectiveness of their strategy—that through persistent (and often protracted) engagements across multiple levels, progressives are able to compel duty-bearers to respond and hold them to account.

Ironically, while progressives have become fairly sophisticated in engaging government, most of them continue to operate outside of government. With no coherent strategy to successfully contest elections, most government positions are still in the hands of political dynasties and traditional politicians.

If progressives are to gain more enduring reforms, then it is imperative that they engage in elections with greater zeal and earnestness. This requires converting their advocacy agenda into a political program that can gain public support and win political power. This, of course, is no easy task, especially in a country where patronage continues to hold sway. But as Nelson Mandela once reminded us, "It always seems impossible until it's done." ■

Image: www.rappler.com



²⁹ Labesig, Vergel (2022). "Student Councils Unite to Lobby Education Agenda." The POST. June 19. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/h7t9fbnc>.

³⁰ Second Congressional Commission on Education (2024). *Miseducation: The Failed System of Philippine Education (EDCOM II Year One Report)*. Pasay City; p. 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. ii.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 322.

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