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Brookings Intersections Podcast:
Scaling to Sustainability

Wednesday, March 15, 2017

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PITA: Welcome to intersections, part of the Brookings podcast network. I'm your host Adrianna Pita and with us today are Jenny Perlman Robinson, who is a fellow with our center for universal education, and John McArthur, who is senior fellow with the global economy and development program. Jenny is the co-author of the Millions Learning: the scaling up quality education in developing countries report, and John is also a senior adviser to the UN Foundation and previously worked with the United Nations Millennium Project.

So today's episode is going to look at how countries, international organizations, and NGO's are working together to meet sustainable development goals. The sustainable development goals being bigger, badder, and more ambitious goals that were set in 2015 where the millennium development goals left off. With a new goal date of 2030 to do things like end hunger, achieve gender equality, and ensure quality education for all. At its core reaching these Development Goals is going to depend very much on whether or how we can get programs to scale up. And Jenny, I'm going to be stealing a quote from the millions learning report about explaining scaling that said that the act of scaling is about expanding coverage while simultaneously ensuring the depth of change necessary to support and sustain a lasting improvement. So I'd like to ask you both to start us off by letting us know what sort of progress we've made toward the goals of education and hunger and health outcomes, some of the other sustainable development goals and about whether this principle of scaling up is even more important now that we've started making some baseline gains. Jenny would you like to start?

ROBINSON: Sure, great, thanks Adriana. Yeah, I mean looking back over the past few decades, there's been remarkable progress in education, particularly enrollment at the primary level. So I think there's a lot to celebrate there and to recognize there. You know, if you look back in the 1950s you had five out of ten children at a primary school age who were in school, and today that number is closer to 9 out of 10. But certainly there are significant challenges that remain and there's two in particular I would mention. The first are the significant disparities that exist both between countries, in terms of enrollment, in terms of attainment, in terms of learning outcomes, but increasingly within countries. You still have 10 percent of all children around the world who remain outside of school and these are children that face multiple forms of disadvantage, more often than not they are poor girls living in rural areas, for example. The second challenge that we still face, and one that's being increasingly recognized, is what we refer to as a learning crisis.

It's become abundantly clear that the mere act of going to school has not necessarily meant that children are actually learning while they're in school. It's estimated that one out of three children a primary school age in developing countries are not learning the very fundamental basics. The basics of reading, writing, math, and you know many of these children have already spent four years in school. So significant, significant, challenges that remain still, both on the access but certainly on the learning front. And these bigger, badder, SDGs as you refer to them as, are really an attempt, I think, to address this. You know, I think there's a real recognition and therefore they focus not just on the education goal, the fourth goal not just on access, but also learning outcomes. They look at, you know, the critical importance of primary

school, but they also recognize that we need to start early, and early childhood education and then what comes after, primary. Primary school certainly not enough. We need to think about secondary school, about vocational training, about preparing young people for life and work after school. So I think a real recognition there. You know in terms of your question around scaling, and you know sort of where we're at addressing those goals I'd say you know what also is clear is that business as usual is not going to get us there, that on current trends we're very far behind from meeting those goals. You know at current rates by 2030, it's estimated that 70 percent of children in low income countries will complete primary school and that's just primary school I mean that was a goal that we were supposed to meet back in 2015. And if you look at the new goals, with sustainable development goals, if we're talking about children in low income countries finishing secondary school, that's only 30 percent at the current rates we're going. So we need to significantly accelerate progress and scale up what's working.

ADRIANA: John?

MCARTHUR: How do you top that? I'd say, taking a big step back that maybe on a slightly shorter time horizon, so go I won't go back to the 1950s here but maybe it goes back to the 1990s. I think a big piece of how we're to think about this is that we're changing our definition of the problems over time. So 20 years ago a lot of the orthodoxy, if you will, was about, you know, get the economy's going and the rest will come. You know you'll get the health outcomes, you'll get the education outcomes, you'll get, over the long term, the environmental outcomes. And I think both, through the limitations of that approach in being not successful enough, but also in saying, well there's a lot of things that give you prosperity, give you improvements in living standards

over time, to then feed back into the cycle. The millennium development goals were very powerful over time. It took a while to broaden people's perspective on what's the problem we're trying to solve. And, for example, I would say health, the global health revolution of the past generation, is arguably the biggest deal breakthrough in terms of how the world defines a problem and solves a problem but it's even a set of problems because global health is a big complicated thing. But the other big thing is that it removed some of the false competition.

So I remember being in a lot of meetings in the early 2000s when I was getting involved in the stuff at the U.N. and people would say, well you've got to make a choice is it health or education which you're going to do first in country X, and that's a false choice. And that's like saying well should the ministry of education do something or the Ministry of Health do something. Well they both have jobs to do. They both can do more with a bit of support and what we saw is that both could do a lot more if we change our approaches. So we've seen that that kind of false competition between issues has been mitigated. But now we're also saying well, there were some big big breakthroughs and again the health stuff, I did this study recently where I looked at where has there been a change of pace, a change in trajectory on different indicators. If you add all the numbers up the global AIDS pandemic and action around that went from a too hard to solve problem, over the course of really less than 20 years, to pretty matter of fact let's just finish the job and get rid of this disease. All sorts of things happened including the launch of the Global Fund to Fight Aids and beat malaria, the launch of PEPFAR, the U.S. program under President George W. Bush. And the whole, if you would, awakening around oh we need to invest in the practical issues of health. Big revolution

and child mortality or child survival too and especially in Africa where there is a huge acceleration in gains but also a little bit of acceleration in China, in India, and other parts of the world too. And if you add up all the additional lives saved, it's faster than business as usual progress because the world's generally been making long term progress on this stuff. It's more than 20 million lives and maybe as many as twenty nine million depending on how you set your counterfactual. So it's pretty big numbers of lives.

There's also, if you look at the kind of trends as they were going in then and where they ended up, it's at least 50 million more kids who finish school around the world and maybe as many as 100 million, again depending on how you set the counterfactual but there are these other issues that are more than business as usual trend. And there is no single answer to what has happened and I stress that because it affects how we think about what needs to happen. There is no single answer to what needs to happen there are so many situations and cases, it's not infinitely complicated but there's a lot of things happening at once. And so if we look at something like access to safe drinking water, the world actually made pretty big gains on that to achieve quote unquote the millennium development goal of cutting those without access by half by 2015, big success. Most of that was actually on track to happen anyhow. So it wasn't a big acceleration it was kind of a business as usual, that's a mega trend. And so I stress that because if we look out at what needs to happen next, well we have a new definition of problem so as Jenny was just saying, OK great so we get kids in school. What did they learn? Well we know we need a better approach to measuring what they learn. And so there's a lot of work that Jenny and her colleagues, Rebecca Winthrop and others, have been, at Brookings and elsewhere, trying to hone in on a clear set of metrics we

can get into that area and what that should be. But when you set those clear standards then you can also say, well, how do we organize around those standards? And then you have these new big big things in the world which is just taking on the education. Well what's the nature of the global economy? What's the nature of skills? We don't even know exactly what skills you need in 2017 let alone what skills you need exactly in 2027 or in 2037 when all these kids are going to be out in the workforce. And so I've come to think of this not as a quote unquote development challenge but as what I am calling these days a living standards challenge which is about a broader conception of living standards but also a deep question of who sets the standards. And I would argue that politically right now we're going through a very tumultuous time of both what are the standards and who sets the standards. And that's my best attempt to distill the problems that are in front of us as we think about, you know, the sustainable development goals.

ROBINSON: Can I just add John I couldn't agree more with you in terms of this not being seen as quote unquote a development issue because as you were talking about you know what are the jobs that are currently available what are the jobs going to look like in the future. I mean the way we think about it at the center of universal education is what are the skills that young people need for a changing world. And it's the same skills, you know it's the same sort of question whether you are you know sitting here in Washington D.C., or you're in Nairobi, or you're in, you know, in New Delhi. And so I think you're absolutely right. Yeah.

MCARTHUR: Or even, I would say, a similar question of a different form in each place. And so there are some extreme poverty questions that are pronounced there. Some of the old questions but in a more concentrated place because extreme poverty

has come down so dramatically around the world. You know on a business as usual trajectory we get down to roughly 4 percent of the world and maybe 5 percent in extreme poverty by 2030. Right now we're at about 700 million probably best estimate that's way down from what it was even 10 years ago. 4 percent. 5 percent that sounds great until you think that's still a few hundred million people. And most of that on current trajectory will be in the so-called fragile states. So it gets into these very tough questions around you know how do we make sure that there's an opportunity for livelihoods in places that are stuck in maybe a fragility poverty trap? How do we think about one of the things I think super exciting like so-called unconditional cash transfers or even basic income support, which is getting extremely cheap? Not the answer to everything but an incredibly powerful tool in a world that's going to broadband mobile phone connectivity and we're seeing you know organizations like, give directly, pilot that in extremely low income places in Africa. The evidence coming out of this will hopefully help us think quite differently about the range of tools that are available for the range of problems we're looking at. And just to finish it I think that the, not to finish but to add one final layer of this bit, is that we're looking in the North American context, very deep questions about what's the future of work.

You know as autonomous cars, self-driving cars come on the road, and that's going to displace the next 10 years probably many many people of your high school education for example who have that as a major occupation. Well what are the skills that those people need to get the next round of employment. If they're displaced, when they're displaced this is a deep question but also gets to well how would they learn if you're a 40 year old driver, you know what's the way for you to learn the new skills?

And it might not be for a quote unquote J-O-B job. It might be for a range of new tasks that are coming online in a new approach to employment. So this is all kind of new frontier stuff but it's all very interconnected even if we're not used to thinking of it that way.

ADRIANA: So many of the development goals are interconnected and I was struck in reading about the different things that, you know if you improve education outcomes, you also improve health outcomes you halve child mortality, it improves environmental sustainability because more educated people are more likely to use birth control and have fewer kids so you don't need to support as many people on the same plot of land. John you had had a great quote about reducing hunger in Africa, it was particularly a double barreled thing because you improve farming ability, people can make more money off the farm that allows them to expand things and then go get another job off of the farm. And so there's this interconnectedness that leads back to the siloing effect they're talking about whether you just have to choose one thing or the other. That was a great thing to bring up about what's important to focus on.

ROBINSON: Yeah. Did you, I'm curious John and since you were involved in both sort of the MDG and the SDG process to various degrees, did you find that there was a greater recognition? I mean I guess that's what you're starting off by saying that it's not a zero sum game and that you know the intersections between these because, I found at least from education, You know I feel like we are constantly sort of banging our heads and making the case that look this is a fundamental human right in of itself. And it's you know critical to get all the other you know development goodies as one of my colleagues at COE says, and you know there's vast data you know to differing degrees

depending on the social or economic outcome. But there's certainly data to support that right? Do you think it sort of resonates more and people picked up on it more on this time around?

MCARTHUR: Yeah I think it depends who you ask for sure. So if you go to the policy wonk or the kind of diplomatic circles, everyone will tell you everything is connected to everything, which it is. I actually think there are important points to recognizing that but also limitations to saying that. Because if everything is connected to everything what do you do? Like what's your entry point? And this is where again I think the world is searching its way through recognizing silos aren't ok but some problems are specialized. So we have doctors for a reason. We have people who focus on disease control for a reason. I don't necessarily want the agronomists working on the next Ebola outbreak. I want that disease control people because that specialists issues, which need specialist response and that's just one illustration. And so I think part of what we have to think about is how the specialist communities can work alongside each other.

This is part of how I think about the SDGs now which is different about how I used to think even about these 17 goals because I was talking to someone who said 'oh I always thought of this as the U.N. you know bureaucrats sitting there and coming up with something about what they thought the world needs to do' and I said no no no my take on it now is that these are these 17 constituencies that all are working on their issues anyhow, the oceans expert community, the peace and conflict and institutions community, the education community and everyone works on this stuff together but they all say no. They all know that they need to be pointing if not towards the same north star at least towards the same constellation. And so the goals force a new form of

connectivity which in some cases is better answered, health and education we probably have pretty good understanding not perfect but pretty good. But others you know food systems with oceans with infrastructure and energy we know it's all connected but the practical entry points need to be figured out a bit more. And so this is where I think we have a need for people to rally around the things they care about as they're part of the Constellation. But also we need to allow and encourage very bottom up approaches for people to find their version of a solution to their versions of the problem in the places where they live and work. And that's part of this, again, duality of we have global problems some of which need very globally connected answers and multilateral institutions places like the Global Fund to Fight Aids and beat malaria like again PEPFAR These are big institutions that make a big difference and especially in the poorest parts of the world. But a lot of these issues require you know very local institutions to come up with their local reference points and then to share knowledge about how they're doing. And that's where I hope that we'll see on even a benchmarking frame, Cities and states and provinces start to come up with more of their metrics in all parts of the world that they can make up their regional scorecards on to say here's how it works for us, How does that work for you? Oh you're doing better than us on this part. We're going to learn from you. You're doing worse than us on this part. You should learn from us. We beat you on this goal.

ROBINSON: Yeah. No I mean on the sharing knowledge front, It was interesting. I mean that's something with the millions learning report that you mentioned Adrianna. You know when we were thinking about scale and education that was one of our first starting points, is what other sectors have done it well? Where else or disciplines not

even within development right? What can we learn from technology, from social innovation, from the business community, from, from health from agriculture and elsewhere. And you know when you are referencing the tremendous progress that was made, for example with the HIV AIDS pandemic, you know it made me think if we were to sort of break down what contributed to that. You know it's very much the same sort of factors that we identified around millions learning right. I mean data had to play a central role right sounding the alarm bell you have a crisis these are the numbers, this is who is affected, showing that progress is possible, right, that there actually is a response or something that can be done. You know leadership, political leadership, leadership at all level, right? The president coming forward and saying that there's a problem in their country, coalitions and partnerships, right, certainly played a role in financing. So, it's just, it's interesting as distinct as many of these issues are I mean there's a lot more. Those are just some of them off the top of my head I can imagine with the pandemic that played an important role is certainly a lot of this sort of drivers that we found in education where we've seen I think success at a larger scale.

MCARTHUR: And this is where I would just say that the world has not yet connected its response to education needs with the needs themselves. So we have had progress. We have education for all FastTrack initiative, we have the global partnership for education, we have the multilateral, the World Bank and so forth. We have a lot of so-called bilateral programs, but it's one of the great puzzles in the world why something that, roughly speaking everyone agrees on, education matters. It's not a left right issue on all sides of the spectrum people are saying right, of course we should invest in education and especially even girls education, people get it. You don't have to persuade

people that this matters but we haven't yet scaled up our global institutional response to this. And that's a conundrum that I think it could be one of the early breakthroughs of the sustainable development goals. And part of this is, at a meta level, about how do you create a sense if things can be different? And I think the AIDS treatment response is very important for that because it gave us this impossible problem over here but oh my gosh things could be different for a bunch of the reasons that Jenny just said. Then you had breakthroughs on malaria control and maternal health later got on the agenda and even neglected tropical diseases get on the agenda, and you know there's kind of a cascade effect from one issue to the other.

Well there's a bunch of breakthroughs that are needed on what I would call the learning agenda and we've had this big breakthrough on getting primary kids in school. We need a breakthrough on what they learn when they're in school and that's why these metrics issues are so important. My understanding is we need very clear convergence on numeracy literacy and breadth of learning is the core. I'm advocating for that. Others will have their views, but that's what I'm advocating for. But then we also need to appreciate that as much as it's complicated the international response to education and learning only has a few options really. There is what countries do themselves at home. There's what countries do because of support from multilateral institutions, and there is what countries do because of support from the so-called bilateral partners. Really those are your only options mechanically. So if we want to scale this up. if we have tens of millions of kids who aren't getting educated properly. If anyone tells me they want to solve this problem then my question is well which of those options do you want to pursue or how do you want to spread it across those three. And there's public and

private issues all over this but I think I'm of the view that we need a dramatically scaled up multilateral response. Not just for the delivery of questions, because those are real and need to put the money somewhere and make sure it goes in the right places but also because these multilateral efforts, done right, become centers of learning about how to solve the problem.

So just sticking with the AIDS example, in 2003 the best estimate was only six million people needed treatment. So they originally, three by five was set, this goal to get to 3 million people in 2005. They only got halfway to the target by 2005. But in the course of learning this, it provided even an academic Bull's-Eye for journals like the lancet to argue about what's going on. So all sorts of rigor around, this is working, that's not working, how come no one's doing this. And then over time you have the epidemiologist get involved and look at things like viral loads among patients and you start to learn about how for example the CD4 counts measure of your immune system interacts with the treatment protocols and over time you said wait a second many more people need treatment. We should be giving it to people much earlier. And then you say as it becomes more viable people start to say, wait a sec, as soon as someone gets infected they should get treatment, A, for their own health, but B, because it dramatically reduces the chance of transmission. So now we don't think 6 million people need treatment, now we think 30 million people need treatment and 15 million people are already on treatments so now it's just a matter of fact thing. But without the multilateral response and the learning of how to do it, learning by doing, so here in education is when you're learning about learning at an institutional level it's very hard to get there and you need the big ambitious goal even to say oh wait a sec we're not even doing this

right. We need to do it better bigger and so forth. And I really hope that the educational learning agenda can be one of the early breakthroughs for the SDGs

PITA: When we talk about scaling things up and talking about these metrics, Jenny you had identified that there were five steps to working on scaling projects which is: developing them, sharing them, activating them, And the last two was funding them, and then measuring and learning them. There is apparently a large global data gap about what we know about learning. What do we know about how kids learn and how they learn, test, and how to get there? So, can you talk a little bit about that data gap and some of the ways that maybe you're seeking to close it or that others are seeking to close it?

ROBINSON: Sure, sure, yeah. I mean I would I would say two things. I think the two adages that definitely hold true when it comes to education is what gets measured gets done, and we can improve what we don't know. I think about that a lot with education. I think you know partly what we saw with the Millennium Development Goals and the indicators we have there is it is much easier to measure, you know, bottoms in seats, or benches, or mats, or what have you, than it is, you know, as John spoke to then learning. You know first there's a question of how are you defining learning? You know, even if the three of us went around you know this table and talked about how we defined learning it probably would look very different. And I appreciate, you know, John's advocating for this notion of you know literacy numeracy combined with this breath of skills, you know, being more inclusive of the range of skills that children and young people need to be healthy, safe, productive, in their lives. But yeah, so I think there's a real recognition there that we need to first come to some sort of clarity or

understanding of how we're thinking about learning and what it entails, you know what

children need to learn, you know, what the future's going to look like. As we said earlier

the sort of uncertain times, you know, a changing world and so it's probably not

necessarily a concrete skill per se but it's thinking more perhaps about you know some

of these you know agility, flexibility, type skills because we don't know honestly what the

future's going to hold. And then thinking about how we go about measuring it. And I

think here you know we didn't we haven't talked about technology at all John but I think

technology has a real important role to play here. I mean technology I think will certainly

be tremendously, and has been, and continues to be, tremendously helpful with this

data challenge and education in improving the efficiency by which we can collect and

analyze and respond to data in a way that you know we just haven't really been able to.

So you know defining learning, developing the common metrics we're going to agree to,

and then thinking about, you know the use of technology and other things in order to do

it more efficiently. I think the other important point though and we're talking about data

that I wouldn't want to forget it's data at all levels. Right. So clearly you know I think at

an international level you know something like the sustainable development goals that

allows us to compare across country, across regions is critically important. But it goes

all the way down to the individual level right? I mean we need data at the at the student

level, at the school level, you know, at community level, at the national level. I mean, so,

it's really about data not in terms of a high stakes exams and really keeping kids you

know in some ways out of the system, or encouraging one to teach to a test, but it's

really thinking about data in terms of how do we improve with what we're doing? How do

we use it in a way that it feeds back to teachers and to policymakers to think about how

are we allocating, you know, time and attention and resources in a way that's going to maximize learning and frankly reach those who have historically not been reached.

PITA: John are there some different areas where either we're not facing the global data gap where we know exactly what we need to do and we just now need to do it, or what are then some of the other goals where the similar challenge is knowing what we need to do next?

MCARTHUR: Great question. I think there are a variety of answers to that so take that AIDS one. We know we need to scale up you know antiretroviral treatment another roughly speaking 15 million people. We kind of know that, we've got to get there, we've got to get the mechanisms in place, keep getting the prices down on the drugs, and you know build the health systems around it. There's lots of things around just sticking with health, say non-communicable disease, where you know hypertension, diabetes, things like these are major killers shortness of life. Increasingly in emerging markets in particular these places that are becoming the emerging powers of the global economy they are moving from nutrition to less good nutrition as a major living standards challenge. So there you get into everything from what's the source of calories to what is even the way in which cities are set up for people to have healthy lives in the way they work the way they commute and so this this stuff gets very place specific. One wouldn't know what's the role of sugar? You know a lot of things that the United States is dealing with. Also looking at things, in my home country Canada, you know mental health is becoming a really big thing even the finance minister has been talking about this as a major need and there's huge unmet need for mental health services across the country. This is like a taboo that's being removed. One of our colleagues here

Brookings, Carol Graham, has just put out a book looking at you know even the variety of measures of well-being and happiness and also actually sadness across advanced economies including the U.S. which are really redefining again how we define living standards. Because it's not OK if you're stagnant $35000 a year income if you feel like you're losing everything or you might lose everything or you have lost something. And so it's not about the income so much as how you fit into often your society and what that feels like.

So I think a lot of this is crucial important new frontiers. We have other issues where I think that the foremost phrase underpinning the Sustainable Development Goals is no one left behind. And that is the Zeit Geist if you will. Again that takes a different shape in different places, different people are left behind for different reasons, in different societies. So again just in the Canadian example Aboriginal indigenous populations it's a major issue country hasn't figured out how to get safe drinking water universally to all the reserves it's you know front page story even last week in Globe and Mail. Many people can't believe that we're at this situation, but we are. It's persistent, it's chronic, and it needs to get fixed. So I think if we look at many of these questions and this is one of the subtle aspects of how the Millennium Development Goals became so important is especially in the early days it was less about how to do it, it was more about let's agree on what we're trying to do over the longer term. So originally a 15 year time horizon was way way out there and an international system that was basically built on three year rollovers of everything. You know all the World Bank processes and so-called poverty reduction strategy papers and all these things, grant cycles of countries three years at a time maybe four or five if it is long term. Some of these problems you just

can't answer in that short time horizon. You need to build a longer term view even to get

a dent in the near term. So I think this is a long way of kind of reframing your question,

not dodging it, because there are many things where we just have to scale up. It's a

matter of delivery it's matter results. Even carbon pricing you know we have many of the

world's foremost conservative economists just put out a big report. Marty Feldstein and

others saying you know we need a carbon dividend structure in our economy for all

sorts of reasons. So things like that need to get scaled up to realign incentives. We

need things that are service delivery in many places. One of the big things that we've

been working on in the past several months and again, just to mention more of our

colleagues here, Homie Kharas and I have been working on this notion of well much of

the world especially the non-poorest countries these issues are financed through the

private financing system. It's not through the public financing system. So if you're a

company working on issues of food, say you sell food, you buy food, you prepare food,

whatever you do you've got a major role in the food challenge or the food system

challenge. One of the big issues is how do you align the incentives for all the market

actors to be consistent with the goals the world is trying to achieve. Unilever, for

example, is a major company operates in this space. They've been very proactive in

taking this on Paul pulm and the CEO has been a major advocate of the role of long

term thinking and sustainability and the SDGs but how do we have comparable

indicators for every company operating in the food industry that are relevant for their

environmental footprint, for their workforce standards, for the degree to which their

products might be consistent with or at least not negative towards the SDGs. So we're

not banning chocolate companies, quite the opposite, you know chocolate might not be

the key to achieving the SDGs in the near term, unless you're a cocoa grower. It might

be that, you know, we want to make sure that there are certain elements of practice in

you know the way we think about our grains and we want to make sure that fertiliser use

that's giving us our core protein or food source isn't spewing too many nitrates into the

water system which has been a major issue in parts of the world which actually makes

other problems harder to solve over here.

So how to get the right metrics, and actually Michael Bloomberg chaired

something called the sustainability Accounting Standards Board, which is one of my

favorite exercises in this which is saying for each industry and they really started from

the environmental side, how do we develop industry specific metrics for what a

company would report on alongside its financial reports for its consistency with these

long term issues? Crucially then the links in the chain come up because the company

needs to do its part. The investors, the shareholders, private or public need to have the

same scorecards to evaluate against And we're seeing many pension funds around the

world for example start to ask for this type of scorecard. And then we have the

policymakers who have to set the right incentives to make sure you know encourage the

good things discourage the bad things and then even the market regulators in the

United States. The SEC, the Security Exchange Commission, has to make it normal

and call for the companies to report on those things without those links in the chain. No

actor has enough incentive to do it on their own. But with the links in the chain they all

see how they interconnect. That's where we could get, in my view, an SDG consistent

private sector on all these issues. And most of the world's economic activity least the

majority of it is private sector driven. Most of the innovation and so forth is coming from

that. So then we can get to really interesting issues like, what role could the government have to create incentives with the Learning to, say if you're a company that can generate learning outcome X in language Y, we'll pay for it? Create a competition to see who can do that. It's international learning vouchers. You could start to see in addition to the regulatory kind of performance aspects to it you can start to see something. It's been very effective in health. We need vaccine X to solve this problem. Government says if some some company can come up with it we'll pay for it. And lo and behold they create a competition and they do. How many other areas could we do similar to create these interactions between the public and private sector so that we have both the links and the chains and the stimulus for new approaches to come through.

PITA: You wrote about this Jenny and the millions about the role of government being to create this environment around that.

ROBINSON: Yeah I'd say that was, I mean what you're saying is music to our ears, I mean I think that was one of our sort of headline messages with the report, was you know where we see progress on both the access and learning and particularly in terms of reaching marginalized children. It's where it's not necessarily saying that you know traditionally the government has been the sole provider of education and should continue to do so, but it's the government still maintaining responsibility. And I think that's important that you know the primary duty bear of ensuring that every child you know regardless of of other aspects that they have the right to quality education that's a responsibility the government full stop. That being said the government does not need to do all the education delivery or financing. And in fact you know it's where the government you know provided the space for all those various actors that you talked

about, you know the households, the communities, the private sectors, to be engaged, you know recognizing that as you said this is an enormous challenge. Now I hope, you know, pray, love, that this is the breakthrough the first breakthrough for the SDGs and that is going to take to have that breakthrough everybody. Right. I mean certainly that's stating the obvious. And so you know for us what we're saying it requires is a government to provide that space. But at the same time you know it certainly has a prominent role to play right? I mean has a prominent role in terms of the regulatory framework that you spoke about, in terms of monitoring you know particularly around quality assurance and equity. You know in terms of certainly around equity making sure that again those that last 10 percent are reached.

PITA: We are getting close on time so I think I'm going to jump to a final question which is more present day focused. Thinking about the political turmoil we've had in the last couple of years U.S. and Western Europe a lot of countries becoming a lot more inwardly focused a little less commitment to the international organizations and talking about what that means for the international community, for reaching the sustainable development goals, for any sort of progress on these fronts. Do you have any thoughts on that?

ROBINSON: Yeah look I would say I would love to see U.S. leadership on global education. But that being said I think one of the things that we certainly learned from the research that we did for the millions learning report is that a lot of this sort of disruptive innovation and breakthrough happens oftentimes when there's a crisis in leadership. In chaotic times. So this sort of optimistic side of me at times thinks, you know, if this certainly does not need to come, you know, those sort of breakthroughs that you spoke

about John certainly doesn't need to come from the United States or Europe. In fact when I think about a lot of the exciting progress that's been made a lot of it right has certainly come from low income countries when you think about leapfrogging and development that has come from countries where you know they've, they've skipped landlines for mobile phones. Brick and mortar banks from mobile banking. And so I think we're seeing that and maybe will perhaps continue to see a lot more of that around education. So maybe you caught me on a hopeful day.

MCARTHUR: Yeah I spent a lot of time thinking about this too. Day to day my answer probably changes a little bit. I think the undercurrent is if we go back to our beginning of this conversation, if you think about it in the old way, oh what are we going to do to help the world, it doesn't jive with where the world is. If we think about it as every part of the world seems to be going through a pretty deep conversation around how to make sure that everyone has a fair shot at a good job, a healthy place to raise their kids, and fair a sense of who setting the rules, everything can be bundled into that in a certain sense. And this is why again it as this core question of like living standards and who sets the standards. Because a lot of what we see in different countries and different parts of the world have different levels of optimism right now. Some parts that are doing very well feel very good about things because they're having a long term breakthrough in a historical sense a lot of Asia I think is in that bucket. And you see a lot of parts of the world that have a lot of friends around Africa who we don't want your help, thank you very much. The whole point is we want to be on our own feet, so let us start our business. That mindset is very deep. This is about everyone having their own answer to this question. And so I think that that aspect of no one left behind is a

universal one. I also think that if you look at it, I've spent more time looking at the Canadian even national policy discussion in the past year or so, and in the mandate letters given to ministers publicly for the first time by Prime Minister Trudeau, his whole cabinet, if you look at those mandate letters they actually look a lot like the sustainable development goals for what Canada is trying to achieve. And so each minister kind of job description while they're in office and it's just using different words often but sometimes very similar words and it's really thinking about a very common set of challenges. So I think it's this duality that people need to feel progress at home in order to feel good about doing stuff around the world. But people also realize that everyone needs to feel progress at home. So the United States has had a big wake up call about a whole lot of people who don't feel that they're making progress. And I think my favorite metaphor on this is, if everyone's in a car on the highway it's one thing how far you are from your destination. But most the time when you drive on the highway you don't think minute to minute about how far you are from the destination what you're even subconsciously thinking about is how fast am I going compared to the person next to me? And if you feel like they're going super fast and I'm not, then something feels wrong. So every part of the world might have its own distance to the destination, but everyone wants to feel like they're moving on their highway at a fair pace. So I actually see these SDGs now, and I wouldn't have said this a year ago, I see them now not as global goals but just as much as local goals that need to resonate locally in order to work globally. And that's not the age old like think global act local. It's that we need to be doing both. And the goals in order to have a chance at being effective, which only time will tell, whether it's in a political way but I don't think it has to be political in the

partisan sense I think it needs to be in a kind of social sense. What's meaningful and or in a technical way like who's my city manager working to make sure that all these bits are coming together.

If we can find the right headlines, or if each community can find its right headline, things it is trying to do in this realm and then you can have a kind of neutral scorecard, that it's not about what anyone in New York thinks it's important it's about what we think is important. But we have this nice constellation to help us know how we're doing compared to others which gives us information on what's possible. So that's how I hope it can be useful to everyone. But again the story isn't written and that's for the world to figure out for itself there's seven billion people soon will be eight and that's a lot of authors for the story.

PITA: All right. I think that's a wonderful sum-up point. Thank you both for being here. I want to advise our listeners that they can find the millions learning project, it's more than just a single report there is a lot of great blog posts and video pieces looking at individual case studies and stories coming out of all the work you guys have done. So I recommend folks go to Brookings.edu and search millions learning. You can also find the rest of the work that John McArthur has worked on, they can find you both on Twitter, and they can always follow us on Twitter at policypodcasts. So thank you so much!