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VIEWPOINTS/CONTROVERSIES

The failure of Education for All as political strategy

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Abstract Since 1990 the education development community has focused on a strategy titled: Education for All. This article argues that, as political strategy, it has been a failure. The article explains why and suggests ways to correct the problem.

Keywords Development education · Foreign assistance · Economic development policy · Basic education

In the autumn of 1988, Aklilu Habte, Director of the World Bank's Education Department, called a luncheon meeting of the six education division chiefs and posed a question: Should the World Bank support an interagency initiative on Education for All? Warren Baum, the Vice President for Central Projects, was opposed to it. In his view, the Bank should avoid committing itself to future sector priorities. Other agencies had the luxury of a single agenda—e.g., health, agriculture, education, and children. They would be judged on whether their particular interest had been advanced. The mandate of the Bank was different. The Executive Directors do not report to sector ministries, but to the ministries of finance, and the interests of ministers of finance are to remain above the fray of sector competition. Aklilu wanted to know whether there was a way for the Bank to work with other UN agencies on an Education for All initiative, yet not commit itself in terms of sector priorities.

The division chiefs responded that there was a way. The Bank would finance the Education for All Secretariat in New York and staff it with two colleagues. The Education for All initiative would be used for three purposes: (1) to help generate an awareness of the need for education in developing countries; (2) to help generate new resources devoted to education from international agencies and domestic governments; and (3) help marshal all development assistance agencies to raise the priority of education in the overall agenda for

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development. In essence, it meant a commitment to raise education as a development priority for all donors.

Much has happened in the 19 years since the meeting at Jomtien, Thailand, where the Education for All agreements were signed. Attention has focused on completion and learning achievements rather than simply enrollment. The accuracy and breadth of education statistics have improved. New data on academic achievement, literacy, and expenditures have been designed and implemented in areas of the world where they had not previously existed. There has been a marked improvement in the means to describe problems and track progress. There have been numerous publications on basic education, many with colourful charts and creative figures. There have been films about basic education. The websites of the World Bank, USAID, DFID, CIDA and many other agencies resemble that of UNICEF, with a plethora of photos of young girls attending school in places like Bangladesh, Mali and highland Bolivia. But what has the result really been?

About 17% (117 million) of the primary school age children and 42% (286 million) of the secondary school-aged children are still out of school. Proportions for females (19 and 44%) remain higher than for males (Bloom 2005).

Part of the problem lies in the weak position of foreign aid in general. Foreign aid accounts for only 6.5% of the 463 billion dollars in capital flows to developing countries. The level of resources to repay foreign debt ($101 billion) in developing countries is three times the size of all foreign aid combined ($30 billion) (World Bank 2001).

With $13.3 billion, the United States remain the world's largest source of foreign aid. But this is hardly a major accomplishment. In 1950 the United States was generous. At that time it allocated over 3% of the Gross National Income (GNI) to foreign aid. But by 2002, that portion had declined to 0.13% of GNI. Today, foreign aid is less than 1% of the federal budget, placing the United States in last place in terms of the percentage of its economy allocated to foreign aid among 22 donors (Tarnoff and Nowels 2004).

In the election for president of the United States there was debate over a multitude of important and sensitive issues—defence policy, immigration, social security, health care. But no candidate based the election on promises of more foreign aid. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Foreign aid constitutes a "third rail" in American politics. Attention to it can only hurt a candidate. Is the US an outlier in its attitude to foreign aid? It is not. Over the course of the 1990s, 16 out of 21 donor countries reduced their foreign aid commitments (Heyneman 2006). Whether in Cincinnati or Stockholm, the reasons are similar. The voting population is aging and wants more attention to health care, social, economic and political security. Stories of graft and theft of foreign aid, or inefficient and ineffective programmes have captured the public's attention. Even the World Bank, a principal provider of foreign aid, has published discouraging results of its effects (Dollar and Pritchett 1998). These discoveries have caused the donor community to rethink the criteria under which foreign aid is provided. Now the Millennium Challenge Account provides aid on a grant basis, but only to countries which qualify. These countries have to demonstrate that they are economically and politically responsible. This might be considered progress, except for the fact that very few of the countries where the poor and the unschooled reside are included on this short list of potential recipients (Heyneman 2003a).

But what about education? How has education fared in the competition for resources? Phillip Jones summarizes the current status in this way: "The focus on the MDGs and basic education has side-lined educational aid, as it has been increasingly seen as a marginal concern in the broad assault against poverty and the promotion of economic growth and development" (Jones 2008, p. 38).

Table 1 Cumulative (IDA + IBRD) World Bank lending, 1990–2008

	$ billion	Percentage
Public administration	55	19.9
Transportation	43	15.6
Energy and mining	39	14.1
Finance	34	12.3
Industry	24	9.1
Water	21	7.6
Health	21	7.6
Agriculture	17	6.0
Education	17	6.0
Communications	5	1.8
Total	276	100

Source: World Bank (2009)

At the time of the meeting in Jomtien, education lending at the World Bank accounted for about 6% of new financial commitments. Last year it was 8.1%, that is $2 billion from the total lending of $24.7 billion (World Bank 2009).

However, with respect to the cumulative record since Jomtien, the portion of Bank commitments devoted to education (its second smallest sector) is the same as it was in 1990, 6% (see Table 1). Among all donors, the portion devoted to education is only about 4%. For France it is 2%; for the UK, 7%; for USAID about 6%. Even in sub-Saharan Africa, the total assistance devoted to education among donors is about 10% (OECD 2002). In sum, in terms of development priorities, the education sector has been stagnant for the last 20 years (Heyneman 2005).

But what about the private sector? Isn't it true that much foreign assistance flows through non-governmental organizations and charitable foundations? The fact is that NGOs and foundations committed $2.5 billion in 2000 to assistance in developing countries. But of this, only 13.7% was devoted to education. Equally important, of the education resources, only 2.8% was devoted to primary and secondary education; 73% was devoted to graduate study (OECD 2003, Annex A). Adding the total amount of aid provided by NGOs in 2002 would add only 0.003% to the portion of GNI of the United States devoted to foreign aid. Instead of that percentage being .013, it would be .016, not enough to lift the US from last place among donors in terms of the percentage of its economy devoted to foreign aid (Heyneman 2006).

Educational aid has failed for reasons well beyond foreign aid in general. Commitment to any sector requires a general consensus surrounding the importance of various sub-sectors. The reason diversity of sub-sector priorities is important is to attract interest from a wide variety of development assistance partners; each might be expected to follow their own sense of purpose. The wider the priorities, the more likely it is to attract differing partners and a broader commitment within each partner.

Foreign assistance to the health sector could not be successful if the only priority considered legitimate was assistance to rural health clinics. Rural clinics are interdependent with curative hospitals, research and development, the efficiency of the pharmaceutical industry, networks to care for HIV and AIDS and other significant diseases. Having a constant supply of specialized training and expertise in health economics, epidemiology and health statistics are as necessary as rural health clinics. To be respected and valued, a well functioning health sector requires each of these sub-sectors. The same diverse ingredients for a successful policy of foreign assistance in health are also true of the

environment sector, the agriculture sector, transportation and public sector management. What is true of these successful sectors is also true of education.

The problem with education is that the consensus among donor agencies has been dysfunctional. Between 1960 and 1980, academic education was considered dysfunctional; and manpower forecasting and vocational education had a virtual monopoly among development assistance priorities (Heyneman 2003b). Then came a period in which the donor community became infatuated with basic education and specifically with Education for All. What began as common sense became a restrictive ideology, one which treated other important sub-sectors as being of low priority and tantamount to poor economic strategy. The low value was directed to secondary and higher education, vocational education, engineering and medical education, research capacity building, science and technology and a host of other important arenas.

With the misuse of economic rates of return techniques, the World Bank helped to establish an ideology of basic education and hostility to assistance in other priority areas (Heyneman 1995). This could have been offset if other agencies had exercised intellectual leadership. But they have not. All donor agencies have accepted basic education as the most important priority. Their lemming-like behaviour illustrates why the level of education assistance has stagnated. Treating Education for All as the single most important priority has changed the rationale of education from being the infrastructure necessary for a democracy to being little more than a charitable handout for rural girls. This one-dimensional view of the purposes of education diminishes the professional respect for the sector and makes it politically more difficult for others to take an interest in any part of the sector other than basic education. Treating the sector as if development problems could be solved through massive public relations campaigns reduces the need to treat the sector as a permanent, complex series of organizational challenges, comparable to health, public sector management, and good governance, business, rule of law and other endeavours.

As economic ideology, favouring basic Education for All over other education priorities stems from two policy papers of the World Bank distributed in the 1990s. The first placed a low priority on lending for higher education (World Bank 1994). The second reiterated the argument of the first paper and portrayed basic education as if assistance to it constituted an "iron law" of good economic policy (World Bank 1995). The reaction from the academic community was hostile (Bennell 1996; Colclough 1996; Alexander 2001) and required that the Bank reach outside its own staff to an external panel of experts to try to rebalance the priority placed on the contribution of higher education to development (Task Force on Higher Education 2000). However, the damage had already been done.

One of the more destructive traditions which the donor community has adapted is something called *donor coordination*. Donor coordination saps choice and competition from the assessment of intra-sectoral priorities and leaves a recipient nation more vulnerable and more powerless than before. It is particularly problematic when the purpose of the coordination is simplistic. Because international assistance to education has become a matter of ideological purity, organizations which might have had an interest in assisting specific areas of development such as higher education have lost interest. No organization would want to be accused of not being "on message". The monopoly of basic education over sector priorities has also meant that in areas of the world where enrollment in basic education has been attained, such as Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, East Asia and many parts of Latin America and the Middle East, foreign aid to education has all but disappeared.

The effect of this disagreement has been deeply disruptive of the effort to achieve a consensus over education as a priority within foreign aid. The effect has been to splinter the education community into warring camps, some arguing for basic education as if it

were a religious purpose, while others criticizing international agencies such as the World Bank for providing false evidence to justify its view. No matter how problematic the World Bank has been with the shift in its policy papers and higher education, UNESCO, UNICEF and the major bilateral agencies are equally to blame. The international community had already allowed the education statistical function of the United Nations to deteriorate (Heyneman 1999), making it difficult to monitor change parallel with the statistical standards in other sectors. No agency has been sufficiently courageous to deviate from the accepted Education for All message (Heyneman 2003a). None has taken a lead in demanding that education policy be more balanced. Some agencies, such as the UNESCO International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP), have been so focused on the least developed countries that they have virtually recused themselves from making a contribution to the education thinking anywhere else (Heyneman and Pelczar 2004). The absence of professional courage has allowed the development community to move easily on to other priorities—democracy, human rights, problems associated with religious fundamentalism. The absence of a balanced education sector development strategy has also meant that private organizations, including major associations of universities and technical institutes and private businesses, have taken only a marginal interest in development, on the grounds that the development community had only a marginal interest (or in the case of private business, even a hostility) toward what they could offer.

The future

To rectify the situation, I argue that three things need to happen. Development assistance agencies need to take a leadership position with respect to a diversity of educational priorities (Heyneman 2003c, 2004). Bilateral agencies should pioneer areas in which their countries excel, such as technology and higher education and vocational education and private educational commerce. Agencies with specific educational mandates such as UNESCO need to reiterate the interdependence of education sub-sectors, both public and private, and the importance of all of them. They should also attempt to live up to their real mandate and speak to education problems and challenges worldwide, including the US, Europe and the industrial democracies. By limiting their attention to developing countries, they fail to live up to their true purpose: to speak for education globally.

Knowing that Education for All would fail to generate higher priority for education in the allocation of foreign aid, should the division chiefs have approved the Bank's participation? My answer would be yes. Our motives for participating were genuine. How would we have predicted that the education sector would have become factionalized, even our own institution? At the moment when Aklilu posed his question we had just published what was perhaps the most inclusive education policy paper ever published by a development assistance agency (World Bank 1980), a paper which excluded no educational priority and which specifically included education research and many other less popular initiatives in addition to basic education. Perhaps it is time to return to those basic principles.

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