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Not Just a Matter of Numbers: Linking Education with Equal Opportunity

*"...high rates of youth unemployment
are a waste of human resources and a
huge cost to the global economy"*

-The Economist, Twitter, July 7, 2011

DevTech's Senior Gender Advisor, Dr. Charla Britt, explores the impact of gender-based constraints on educational attainment, workforce readiness, and labor market outcomes in the Eastern Caribbean, and discusses what this might mean for reducing gender inequality in other countries or regions. The lessons learned are likewise relevant to other countries, as demonstrated by DevTech's work in the Dominican Republic and Colombia, where the Spaces for Entrepreneurship program develops the soft and hard skills needed for the 21st century workplace in both girls and boys.

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Education yields benefits in individual, household, and intergenerational well-being, and improves labor productivity and economic competitiveness. *Scientific American* (June 2011) recently highlighted a worldwide pattern that holds true for rich and poor countries: infant and child mortality decreases in proportion to the years of schooling that women attain. It cited a study by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington that calculated that, as a global average, education accounts for 51 percent of the decline in mortality in children younger than five - the single biggest factor by far. Whether the increase in education is from ten to eleven years, or from two to three years, infant mortality declines. Educated women tend to have smaller families, in part because of increased employment opportunities, and better knowledge about nutrition, immunization, and contraception.

Given the many benefits it provides, universal access to primary education is an important Millennium Development Goal. Many countries are making great strides in reducing gender disparities at the primary and secondary levels. However, while countries are turning the corner on providing equal access, and some have even tipped the balance with girls exceeding boys in enrollment and educational attainment, gender gaps are stubbornly persistent in employment, promotion, wages, and training. This raises important questions about the best way to link education with equal opportunity in labor market outcomes.



A GENDER APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF EDUCATION QUALITY AND COMPETITIVENESS: EASTERN CARIBBEAN

Gender dynamics in the countries of the Organization of the Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) and Barbados present a conundrum compared with trends in other regions or countries. These countries rank as “medium” or “high” on the UNDP Human Development Index - an international composite that compares life expectancy, education levels, and standards of living. Positive social indicators for the sub-region include fertility rates that are close to replacement level, high life expectancy, and low infant and child mortality. These countries have also achieved universal primary education for girls and boys, and are transitioning toward universal secondary education. In contrast with many other countries, girls in the countries of the OECS and Barbados form the majority of students from primary through tertiary education, and in many vocational and skills training centers. Because of male underachievement and high drop-out rates, the educational attainment of girls and women now exceeds that of boys and men. Nevertheless, while some gains are being made in occupations and supervisory positions, women are still unemployed at rates that are nearly twice that of men, and they tend to be confined to low status and low-paying jobs.

The politics of gender debates in the region tend to use the fact that girls are doing better than boys in education to suggest that gender inequalities in the Caribbean have tilted toward “male marginalization”. Roberta Clarke, Director of the UN Women’s Caribbean Office, argues that the better performance of girls is not about disparities in access to education, as boys and girls have equal access. Rather, it suggests gender disparities resulting from social norms and structural constraints. Specifically, it involves differential treatment of boys and girls by teachers, differences in the behavior expectations attached to boys and girls by parents and society at large, and the structure of and approach taken by the education system. On closer inspection, it is evident that the education system and gender-based expectations are failing both boys and girls - with girls simply doing less badly than boys.

Eastern Caribbean countries spend a relatively high percentage of GDP on education (nearly 6.4 percent, according to the available country data from the USAID Global Education Database), but the results are mediocre. Just 85 percent of students at the primary level complete their studies. At the end of secondary school, two-thirds of students pass only one or two subject exams, and close to one-third (28 percent) do not pass any. Successful students, who did well and have access to tertiary education (only about 13 percent), often migrate to North America and Europe without any intention of returning to the region (World Bank 2007). Another dynamic is the degree of stereotyping that occurs in the subjects studied or types of training pursued. At the tertiary level, a majority of women study subjects in the humanities while men are over-represented in the sciences. Jobs in construction and metal work are largely held by men, and the majority of jobs in the hotel industry, particularly at the low end, are held by women. All of this serves to erode the pool of qualified workforce-ready employees and entrepreneurs, leaving a majority of low-skill, minimally-educated people who are underprepared for the labor market.

Caribbean countries have struggled to shift from areas of traditional production (e.g., bananas and sugar cane) into value-added activities that provide more secure employment and higher income-earning potential. Throughout the 1990s, economic growth averaged a disappointing 2.6 percent (IMF 2010). The poor growth record of the 1990s stands in contrast to the generally rapid expansion of the global economy during this period. In the past decade, the events of September 11, 2001 and the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 (which resulted in all countries of the region tumbling into a recession) further impacted economic prospects. Continuing patterns of economic growth suggest that the sub-region is trapped in areas of productive activity that are unable to benefit from booms, and remain highly vulnerable to busts and recessions.

This poor record of economic performance reflects underlying structural weakness which can be linked to education failures in the development of the sub-region’s workforce as well as gender-based constraints. Women and men are affected differently by prevailing cultural norms, practices, and prejudices that shape their life choices from a very early age. These have critical impacts

on performance in the education system and, ultimately, employment prospects - which is why women generally outperform men in school, but underperform men in the labor market, severely constraining their ability to escape poverty. Gender identities, based on traditional notions of what it “means” to be a man or a woman, remain strong predictors of opportunity. In the Eastern Caribbean, gender-specific constraints include the different places that men and women occupy in the economy, differences in roles and responsibilities (in the market economy as well as the reproductive and care economies), and the different ways in which men and women are affected by formal and informal institutions (including discriminatory laws, educational systems, social practices, and cultural conventions).

"The education system and gender-based expectations are failing both boys and girls - with girls simply doing less badly than boys"

Drastic educational reform is needed in the Eastern Caribbean to increase the relevance and quality of education (including vocational training programs that do not target or discriminate against either gender) for new economy labor markets and entrepreneurship. Perhaps because of weak educational attainment, aspiring entrepreneurs tend to pursue businesses in low-productivity and low-risk ventures that have limited income-earning potential. While this is better than unemployment or illicit activities, which is the other option for many Caribbean youth, the data suggest that it may not bode well for income generation. This underscores the importance of focusing on employment creation to prevent the growth of at-risk populations in what has been a relatively developed region.

TRANSFORMING GENDER NORMS TO INCREASE EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME GENERATION OPPORTUNITIES

While important gains are being made in universal access to education for boys and girls in many countries, the value of this education will need to be examined more closely. Weaknesses and inequalities in

educational systems fail to adequately prepare young people for the demands of a modern economy and labor market (particularly those drawn from poor households), and to facilitate skills adaptation. The gender stereotyping that continues to be reinforced through education can fuel expectations and behavior patterns that negatively affect life choices and limit the ability of both women and men to maximize their individual productive potential. Reforms aimed at improving workforce readiness and education programs for students who have dropped out or been unsuccessful in traditional school systems should minimize gender-based constraints and vulnerabilities, and increase social and economic resilience.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, where DevTech developed the Espacios para Emprender (EpE; in English, Spaces for Entrepreneurship) program, record numbers of young people are currently jobless. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that 600,000 young people in [Latin America] were left unemployed by the global financial crisis, reversing gains made from 2003 to 2008. Nearly 20 percent of the youth in the region are neither studying, nor looking for jobs, threatening to become what the ILO calls, “the lost generation” (Christian Science Monitor, March 2010).

DevTech has learned from previous and existing programs that providing vocational training is not enough. The school system in Latin America and the Caribbean has not been effective at developing the soft skills that boys and girls need to succeed in the 21st century (leadership, time management, communicating effectively, and developing a life plan), as well as academic support to stay in school and vocational/technical skills to pursue productive employment. The EpE program implementers have tried to work against stereotypes and to provide equal opportunity for growth industries, which in the Dominican Republic include food preparation, hospitality, and information technology. Through the EpE program, 3,377 adolescents have gained hard and soft skills that provide the opportunity to avoid the vicious cycle of exploitive labor and fulfill their aspirations for meaningful livelihood in adulthood.

In many countries, education reforms will be necessary to support 21st century skill development, pedagogy, and curricula, especially for youth who are vulnerable to risky behavior such as gang-violence, participating in illicit industries, engaging in child labor, etc. Poor education performance translates into poor labor market outcomes and, critically, differing levels of income, poverty, and inequality among men and women and the households that they head.

While the goal of universal access to basic education is being achieved, it is critical to increase the relevance and quality of education. This should be complemented by promoting the expansion of the demand for skilled labor by facilitating employment generation at the enterprise level.

Reaching gender equality is not just a matter of numbers. It is about having the same chances for learning, as well as the same opportunities in employment, wages, promotions, and training.

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Established in 1984 by economist Jorge A. Sanguinetti, Ph.D., DevTech Systems, Inc. is a consulting firm that focuses on four practice areas:

- Education and Youth Development
- Gender Equality Analysis and Programming in All Sectors
- Performance Monitoring and Evaluation
- Public Financial Management

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