

DEVTECH phere

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TOWARDS A NEW STRATEGY IN EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

When it comes to evaluating the advances in educational development in the “developing” world during the last 50 years, I have to be counted among the discontented. Perhaps I have become too demanding or too optimistic (unrealistic?) about many countries’ potential to achieve much more on the education front, but the fact remains that even though it is widely known that education is necessary to increase the stock of human capital needed for economic and social development, many countries are not seriously committed to improving their education systems. As long as we consider economic growth and alleviation of poverty as desirable goals, we ought to be unhappy with the current status of educational development, and dissatisfied with the strategies that have been applied until now. The number of countries that have reported some improvements is less than the number that can be considered stagnant or worse. In some cases, instead of advances we can observe actual regressions in education, especially when it comes to the quality of the education children are getting no matter how many years of schooling they have completed. As a result of its poor quality, the applicability and usefulness of education to economic development and political stability and democracy is also questionable.

My opinion is based on DevTech’s work and research in countries around the world, especially in Latin American and African countries, but is also confirmed by other sources such as reports by PREAL (Programa de Promoción de la Reforma Educativa en América Latina), the Caribe-Partnership for Educational Revitalization of the Americas, and UNESCO (*Assessment of Basic Education in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1990–2000*). After perusing these reports the reader has always the classical choice of deciding whether the bottle of wine is half empty or half

full. I would say that it is not a question of halves, since I feel that the wine is not only way below the halfway mark, at least in many countries but is possibly decreasing.

We can only blame the countries themselves, and in blaming the countries I firmly believe that the responsibility for educational backwardness and stagnation is equally shared by governments and civil society (including the business sector). This has been explicitly recognized in the foundation of the Millenium Challenge Corporation (MCC). The challenge now is how to incorporate these considerations into new strategies to support, facilitate, or even foster educational development in those countries that need it the most, precisely those that do not qualify for assistance by the MCC.

Even though it is not practical to conceive or apply the same strategy to different countries, there are some strategic principles that could have a wider applicability or that could work in a few countries. Traditionally, educational development strategies by funding agencies and donors in general have focused on ministries of education under the erroneous assumption that such ministries exist to provide education, when, in fact, in many countries such public-sector agencies operate under different agendas that in reality use education as a cover-up for political purposes. It is obvious that this condition presents a real obstacle to any source willing to invest resources in real educational development, but the fact remains that if we really want educational advancement in underdeveloped countries, we must overcome the actual obstacles to such an endeavor. Therefore, and regardless of the specific strategy that each country must employ to achieve some form of educational development (Education for All or not), I propose that the following general principles be taken

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into account by development agencies committed to educational improvement around the world.

But before we go into concrete proposals, let me point out a possible obstacle to finding a workable strategy for certain countries. As much as Education for All (EFA) is a desirable and commendable goal for the developing world at large, it could become an obstacle in some specific countries. In extremely poor countries, for instance, where there is no history of educational excellence (as is the case in countries that in the past did not offer universal education, but did have some educational elite), trying to achieve education for all within a hard budget constraint, i.e., when resources are not sufficient to achieve universal education with minimum standards of quality, is an inferior strategy. Why? Because universal education is not determined by supply-side factors alone. A major strategic shortcoming of the EFA program is that it mainly relies on the supply of educational services by governments, without taking into consideration the demand side, i.e., the desire of *all* parents and children to attend school. Most parents can be very sensitive to the quality of education their children receive. They notice the changes in their children when they return from school every day, changes that can be attributed to schooling, gains in knowledge, discipline, character, and other factors. Children quickly transmit in their homes what they are learning, the kinds of experiences they have while in school, and parents usually know how to appreciate them. Therefore, if we pursue universal education without a minimum quality, EFA goals will never be achieved because of failures on the demand side, even if we perfunctorily fulfill all of

the requirements on the supply side (school buildings, teachers, materials, etc.).

Based on the above, we can now discuss some of the elements that in my opinion should constitute the foundations of a new strategy for donor sponsorship of educational development in less-developed countries. The pivot of a new strategy should be to clearly define country-specific quality standards to be guaranteed by the education system as a first step in a long-term game plan for educational development. (I do not believe in quick fixes; therefore, short-term strategies are

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not considered here because they are frequently wasteful and deceptive if they are not part of a medium- or long-term approach.) It should not be necessary to interrupt this discussion with a clarification of the actual meaning of *quality of education*. Unfortunately, when speaking to different education officials (country officials as well as many in development agencies) one cannot fail to notice that there are many misconceptions about the true meaning of the concept. The most frequent error is to equate quality of education with the quality of the inputs of the educational process (especially quality of teachers, educational materials, and school environment) and not the quality of the final product (the level of cognitive and noncognitive development that a student gains in school). In this article the essence of quality is in the final product, regardless of the “quality” of the inputs. In fact, we can have “good” teachers, materials, and many other inputs that make a poor contribution to the quality of the final

product if they are not well administered or combined with other essential inputs (good management, accountability, motivation, etc.).

Definition of goals in standards of quality requires a dynamic approach, not a static one. This means that quality goals (for instance, as measured by achievement standards) should not be set for one point in time, but in staggered terms, to reach different goals at different points in time. First, each country needs its own definition of standards and its own trajectory. The setting of goals must be realistic and made compatible with the resources available. This is when educational planning falls outside the realm of the ministries of education and commits the entire society, at least the entire government, to educational development.

The definition of goals should not be left to educational authorities alone. Paraphrasing Talleyrand (others say it was Clemenceau), when referring to war and the military, education is too serious a matter to be entrusted to educators. The strategic goals of a society's education system are a matter to be discussed, defined, and monitored by a society at large. Therefore, one of the indicators (not captured by any educational statistics I know about) of a society's commitment to education is the level of participation in educational affairs by other elements of the society besides the educational authorities and, sometimes, the education private sector.

Once goals are defined and resources needed available, the definition of an action plan will certainly be followed by the definition of concomitant changes in: a) curriculum development, b) teacher recruiting/training, c) pro-

duction of educational material, and d) management (for instance, decentralization, reorganization of ministries, or new delivery and financial systems). Curriculum development, an area of dreams for any educator and where unreachable goals are set in many countries, has to be closely coordinated with the goals set by the entire society. In this area, demand for standards must meet supply possibilities. The point is not to maximize quality standards but to make sure that they are above a minimum acceptable level and are considered necessary for each society's development. Higher goals mean fewer resources available for coverage since there is always a hard budget constraint that determines a frontier of possibilities and trade-offs between coverage and quality. We can always attract better teachers at the expense of access and vice versa. The problem is to determine which is the most desirable equilibrium position or, at least, an equilibrium position around which there could be some consensus.

The curriculum development requirements must be made compatible with the quantity and quality of the body of teachers. In some countries, the push for coverage has been so fast that the fiscal resources made available for education were insufficient to attract good teachers. As a result, the ranks of the teaching staffs have been filled by individuals coming from the lowest socioeconomic strata. Even in many countries where teachers come from the middle classes (i.e., they are better educated), there has been an exodus to better-paid professions and the vacancies are covered by individuals ill prepared to teach, or at least to keep the quality standards of their predecessors. All of this means that in many countries a serious (committed to minimum quality

standards) educational development strategy may require a long-term plan to attract better teachers to the profession, which will require better salaries and significantly more funds for the education budget. Increasing the salaries of the current body of teachers in many countries might not work because many teachers, already with serious handicaps in their educational backgrounds, are not trainable to the levels of quality necessary for development, though in some exceptional cases it could be a course of action not to be completely discarded.

Significantly increasing the quality of education has a *sine qua non* in the quality of teachers. And a teacher capable of teaching is not only determined by his/her ability to teach but also his/her motivation, dedication, consistency, etc. Anybody who can penetrate the cultural and political intricacies of developing countries knows that the main obstacles to educational development often reside in the ministries of education and in the teachers unions, in many cases compounded by permanent conflicts between these two entities. Instead of being allies in the educational development efforts of the society, they have become antagonists struggling for power and resources to the detriment of the children's education. Unfortunately, this consideration has been traditionally swept under the rug by donors that have not been able to find a way to deal with such a thorny situation. A possible solution in a strategic game plan for quality could be to decentralize the education system to the point that teacher salary determination could be done at the community level with direct involvement of the parents. Of course, engineering such a system is a complex task that we cannot even start discussing here, but it might be the only course of action left if a strategic alliance between ministries and teachers unions cannot be

achieved. I for one doubt that this is feasible since the concentration of bargaining powers both at the level of unions and at the level of ministries always creates the right environment (what we economists call bilateral monopoly) to play power games that have nothing to do with education.

The above considerations imply that access to quality education might have to be rationed unless countries invest enough resources to achieve universal coverage (perhaps not all the way to nine grades in the beginning). Given the scarcity of resources, governments must provide their corresponding educational private sectors with all the freedoms necessary to prosper. Such an action will serve to finance part of the educational development needs of the country with private funds, while liberating some of the otherwise committed resources to be applied to the education of those who cannot afford private education. Then, to avoid a quality gap between private and public schooling (this gap is usually in favor of private schooling, but sometimes is the other way around), the public sector can use the quality standards of the private sector as a benchmark of quality for the entire society and concurrently determine the levels of resources necessary to keep the same level of quality and universal access. It is clear that the education sector must work very closely with the fiscal authorities of any country when there is a national commitment to educational development. External funding and donor assistance can then be used as supplemental support when those conditions are met.

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Established in 1984 by economist Jorge A. Sanguinetti, Ph.D., DevTech Systems, Inc. is a consulting firm that offers technical assistance in the following practice areas:

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