International Journal of Educational Development 29 (2009) 149–156

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Educational Development

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedudev

Vocational education and training for sustainability in South Africa: The role of public and private provision

Simon McGrath [a,*], Salim Akoojee [b,1]

[a] UNESCO Centre for Comparative Education Research, School of Education, University of Nottingham, Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB, United Kingdom
[b] Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Sector Education and Training Authority, 3rd Floor Block B, Metropolitan Park, 8 Hillside Road, Parktown 2001, South Africa

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
South Africa
Private
Public
Vocational education and training
Economic development

ABSTRACT

Written in the twilight of the Mbeki Presidency, this paper considers the role that skills development has in the sustainability of the South African political–economic project. It explores some of the disarticulations of public policy and argues that these both undermine public sector delivery and open up opportunities for private provision to be, under certain circumstances, more responsive to the challenges of national development. We argue that there is a possibility that the state could work more smartly with both sets of providers. Crucially, however, this would necessitate working more smartly within itself. This was a major plank of the Mbeki strategy but it has failed conspicuously with regard to the Education–Labour relationship. Whether a new President can achieve a radical reworking of this relationship may be an important indicator of the viability of any new development project.

The article concludes with reflections on the renewed international interest in skills development as a way of responding to the real and imagined pressures and opportunities of globalisation. Given the limited success of South Africa in pursuing skills development, we ask whether other African governments are any more likely to achieve a genuine combination of political, social and economic sustainability. The sustainability of national development projects in Africa is likely to continue to be problematic, and skills development will only ever be able to play a limited role in addressing this challenge. Nonetheless, governments can do more to support the sustainability of these skills development systems and need to pay attention to both public and private provision in so doing.

1. Introduction

The current international orthodoxy of globalisation leads to a powerful stress on skills as a central element of sustainable economic, social and political systems at the national and regional level. In the globalisation account, national economic success is largely dependent on the ability to create, attract and deploy human capital more effectively than competitor nations or regions. Skills and knowledge help build international competitiveness, employment and prosperity. This belief is at the heart of OECD and European Union policy statements since the mid-1990s on themes such as lifelong learning and the knowledge economy (e.g., OECD, 1996a,b; European Commission, 2001) and in national policy statements such as the Leitch Report in Britain (DfES, 2006).

Globalisation is intimately linked with the demise of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberalism. Part of the orthodoxy argues that transfer payments to the poor are no longer viable. Instead, the poor are to be brought into the social and economic mainstream by improved employability. Again, knowledge, skills and, crucially, attitudes are seen as central to this drive. It is alleged that improved levels of education will bring with them better prospects of employment, higher incomes and lower propensities to crime and other forms of social delinquency. In the context of the "War on Terror" and a heightened fear about the loyalty of domestic Muslim minorities, Western governments have also come to see education as a vital strategy for managing such communities.

Achieving economic competitiveness, improving social cohesion, reducing crime and, where necessary, shifting the blame for lack of success onto individuals all form important elements of sustaining political parties in power. Thus, education is widely seen as a key policy tool of the globalisation era.

Although such arguments are furthest developed in the most economically advanced countries, they are increasingly permeating other nations. The particular history of South Africa and its

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 115 951 4508; fax: +44 115 951 4397.
E-mail addresses: simon.mcgrath@nottingham.ac.uk (S. McGrath), sakoojee@merseta.org.za (S. Akoojee).
[1] Tel.: +27 11 484 9310; fax: +27 71 602 7317.

0738-0593/$ – see front matter © 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2008.09.008

predominant geopolitical and economic role in Africa have led to such arguments having considerable influence since the beginnings of the negotiated settlement in the early 1990s.

South Africa's ability to achieve sustainability for its national development project is not just of importance domestically. Rather, its regional predominance means that its developmental success or failure is vital to the rest of the continent, both in real economic terms and in terms of international perceptions of African "viability".

This question of the sustainability of the South African national development project, and the role of skills therein, is the focus of this article. Much has been written about South African education and training, including within IJED. An earlier paper of ours (McGrath and Akoojee, 2007) considered the role of education and training in the current *Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa*. Our current paper adds to existing knowledge in two ways. First, it has an explicit focus on the sustainability of the South African development project in economic, social and political terms and does so in the light of the Polokwane Conference of the African National Congress in December 2007, at which Jacob Zuma replaced President Mbeki as Party leader.[2] Second, it compares and contrasts the roles that public and private further education and training are playing in the development of intermediate skills. There has been little attention to the role of private skills development in Africa (see, Atchoarena and Esquieu, 2002 for an exception), and an article that combines a focus on public and private provision is a rarity.

In what follows, we will draw on our individual and joint research and writings over the past 15 years on skills development in South Africa, particularly work done for the Human Sciences Research Council, where we were both formerly based. In the next section we will provide an overview of debates about the sustainability of the South African national development project and of key elements of the national skills strategy. Then, we will turn to first public and then private provision, outlining the key features of each before considering their own internal sustainability and their contribution to the overall sustainability of the South African skills for development project. This will lead us to a series of conclusions about the state of skills development for national development in South Africa and some, more tentative, reflections on the wider salience of the South African case.

2. The sustainability of the South African national development project

Sustainability of a special kind has been at the heart of the development challenge for South Africa. Since the beginning of the negotiated settlement at the start of 1990s, development thinking has sought to balance growth and redistribution so that both work together. A Government of National Unity was designed to prevent white flight and ethnic separatism. Policy through the Reconstruction and Development Programme, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme and the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa has sought to get growth that is sustainable both economically and politically, the latter requiring equity and black economic empowerment. Inevitably, throughout this period there have been contestations around the particular ways in which the state has sought to balance growth and equity but there has been a general acceptance that some such balance is necessary for the post-Apartheid project to be sustainable.

In late 2003 the Presidency issued *Towards a Ten Year Review* (Presidency, 2003), an analysis of the performance of 10 years of democratic government, which drew both on data from government departments and from existing and new work from other agencies and researchers. The overall message of the review was generally positive about the performance of the state but provided a stark warning about the challenge ahead:

> The advances made in the First Decade by far supersede the weaknesses. Yet, if all indicators were to continue along the same trajectory, especially in respect of the dynamic of economic inclusion and exclusion, we could soon reach a point where the negatives start to overwhelm the positives. This could precipitate a vicious cycle of decline in all spheres. (Presidency, 2003: p. 102)

At that point, 10 years into the new South Africa, the state could justifiably point to great success against most macro-economic targets. However, the stark statistics on poverty, inequality and unemployment provide the underside of the story of relative success. Between 18 and 24 million people (45–55%) were in poverty, including between 8 and 10 million in extreme poverty (Everatt, 2003; Gelb, 2003; Landman, 2003; van der Berg and Louw, 2003; Bhorat et al., 2004; Meth and Dias, 2004; UNDP, 2004). One in 10 Africans were malnourished; one in four African children were stunted (Woolard, 2002; Everatt, 2003).[3] Unsurprisingly, this poverty had pronounced spatial, racial and gender dimensions (Woolard and Leibbrandt, 2001; Everatt, 2003; Gelb, 2003). Poverty was also associated with serious inequality, which was amongst the highest in the world (Gelb, 2003; Landman, 2003; Bhorat and Cassim, 2004; Roberts, 2004). And, lurking behind all these statistics was the AIDS pandemic, which contributed to and exacerbated all these other elements (Vass, 2008).

Awareness of the challenges that remained in making the "South African miracle" sustainable led the Mbeki Government, at the start of its second term, to become more explicitly focused on delivery and the creation of a developmental state (McGrath and Akoojee, 2007). Woolard and Woolard (2008: p. 83) show that social spending grew from 9.2% of GDP in 2000/01 to 10.5% in 2003/04. Recent statistics suggest that there has been some decline in poverty (Woolard and Woolard, 2008), with real per capita income growing by more than the average for the poorest three deciles of the population between 2000 and 2006 (StatsSA, 2008).

However, whilst there is some evidence for the, at least partial, success of the government's strategy in economic terms, it appeared to be slipping into serious political decline as the Mbeki second term wore on. Social exclusion is perceived by many to have not been addressed adequately:

> After the end of apartheid there was genuine hope that the lives of the poor would improve. This is what the incoming ANC government had promised. But as more than a decade passed, hope turned to frustration, despair and anger. Those most affected by these broken promises, the 'poors' (sic), have not been silent. In 2005 alone there were 6000 protests in South Africa. The growing dissatisfaction was evident on February 27th, 2006, as Abahlali BaseMjondolo (the shack dweller's movement) with community movements throughout Durban organized an "UnFreedom Day" event in protest of the dire conditions in which so many people must live. (Walsh, 2007)

2007 saw the emergence of a problem of inadequate electricity power supply, which led to the closure of mines for a limited period in February 2008, and which resulted in negotiations at the highest

[2] This paper went to press a week after President Mbeki's eventual resignation.

[3] We will use the official South African racial classifications where "black" is the aggregate term for Africans, Indians and coloureds. Like many other commentators, we acknowledge the state's rationale for using these categories whilst remaining concerned about their essentialising nature and potential impact on building a non-racial society.