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Education, skills, sustainability and growth: Complex relations

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ABSTRACT

The global education agenda, embedded in the Education for All (EFA) Goals, and the Millennium Development Goals, has emphasised the importance of reaching EFA rather than sustaining this achievement. As a corollary, the emphasis for external aid has also been on increasing aid to secure EFA rather than on the dangers of aid dependency in securing and sustaining EFA. The international architecture in support of education for sustainable development appears to have little interest in analysing these tensions between the pursuit of these rights-based EFA Goals, on the one hand, and the kind of economic growth and macro-economic environment that would be necessary to sustain their achievement.

For many developing countries since the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien in 1990, and more especially since the Dakar World Forum on Education in 2000, and the elaboration of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) later that same year, there has been an international concern to assist their reaching the six Dakar Targets. While there has been some very thorough work on analysing progress towards most of these Dakar Goals (e.g. the Global Monitoring Reports [GMRs] on Education for All [EFA]),[1] there has been much less attention to the sustainability of these externally assisted achievements. Will countries which have been assisted to reach universal primary education be able to sustain this when development assistance is terminated? It is not therefore just a question of whether the world is on track to reach the Dakar Goals, but whether individual countries have an economic and political environment that will continue to secure them. Intimately connected to that challenge is an assessment of what is available after school to the millions of young people who have been persuaded to enter and complete basic education. What has happened to the labour market environment, and especially to the nature of work in the widespread urban and rural informal economy, during the years that countries have been encouraged to focus on the achievement of the Dakar Goals?

Equally, in the sphere of technical and vocational skills development (TVSD),[2] there has been a recognition that this sector has come back on to the agenda of development partners as well as of many national governments, especially in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (NORRAG NEWS No. 38, 2007; King and Palmer, 2007). Arguably, however, there is a connection between the emphasis on EFA over the last 15 years, and the re-emergence of TVSD. Policy-makers in aid agencies and in national governments have been aware that the very success of EFA has been producing some of the largest cohorts of young school leavers ever recorded in some countries, and this has generated an intense debate about 'Education for what?' as well as on the role of skills provision as one response to the challenge. But, valuable though TVSD may be for school-leavers, it too is not a guarantee of work or of a job, whether in the formal or informal sectors. There is no automatic connection amongst school, skill and work.

Policy attention has begun to shift, therefore, to an examination of what are the enabling environments in which EFA and TVSD can lead sustainably to poverty reduction and growth (Palmer, 2008). If there is no change in the productivity of work in the informal sector, and if foreign direct investment remains miniscule for many developing countries, what will be the impact on families who have invested in the education and training of their children over this last decade and more? Will they sustain these investments for

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[1] The one Dakar Goal that has proved elusive is the one on 'learning and life skills' (see King and Palmer, 2008).

[2] TVSD is an alternative concept to the more usual technical and vocational education and training (TVET). TVSD capture both the older sense of technical and vocational expertise, as well the newer and more general term, skills development.

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their younger children if school and skill do not lead to improved economic outcomes for the older ones?

The article addresses this question of whether the last 18 years since Jomtien have witnessed an element of unsustainable financing of education and training. Has there been insufficient attention, in the focus on the six Dakar Goals, on the wider investments in agriculture, industry, and infrastructure that the Commission for Africa (2005) and the UN Millennium Project (2005) have argued are necessary accompaniments to the securing of the MDGs?

Evidence will be reviewed from a series of countries that have secured consistent rates of economic growth in Africa. Some attention will be paid to China for the lessons that can be learnt from the 'development-oriented poverty reduction' in its own poorer Western provinces (LGOP, 2003).

It may be useful initially, however, to explore and clarify whether the current UN discourse about education for sustainable development, or about technical and vocational education and training (TVET), or literacy, for sustainable development, has any connection with our concerns here about sustainable financing for education and training, not to mention the sustainability of EFA achievements, or the concern with sustainable economic growth. That discourse then needs to be related conceptually to the discourse on aid dependency, with its intimate connection to sustainable national financing of education, training and other social goals. And that in turn leads straight back to the issue of continued economic growth at the country level. This tends not to look at the character of this economic growth in terms of environmental sustainability. Thus, it is suggested, here, that there is a set of key discourses that need to be connected (and interrogated) if any sense is to be made of the pursuit, simultaneously of the MDGs on the one hand, raising the levels of aid for developing countries, on the other, but also reducing aid dependency, through maintaining or increasing national levels of economic growth. It appears that the general term, 'sustainable development', is a convenient envelope which actually can contain a series of frequently conflicting goals, and not least the pursuit of financial sustainability and environmental sustainability.[3]

1. Education and training for sustainable development versus sustainable levels of education and training for development

As a result of the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) was declared from 2005 to 2014. UNESCO was requested to take leadership over this decade and develop an implementation plan for it. There are four major thrusts to this discourse of education for sustainable development (ESD). These are:

- Improving access to quality basic education;
- Reorienting existing education programmes;
- Developing public understanding and awareness;
- Providing training. (UNESCO, 2005, p. 7).

Since accepting this leadership obligation, UNESCO has indeed developed an international implementation plan (UNESCO, 2005), and this document analyses the evolving notion of sustainable development. There are three core dimensions: environment, society and economy. In terms of our concern with sustainable economic growth in this present paper, it might be expected that the plan would address the nature of economic growth. Surprisingly, however, there is almost no mention of economic growth at all in the entire paper.[4] In fact the discussion of economic issues is only in relation to poverty reduction and to corporate social responsibility and accountability. There is no attempt to discuss either the need for national economic growth to make EFA (and TVSD) sustainable, and to avoid long-term aid dependency, nor of the trade-offs between such economic growth and environmental sustainability.

Intriguingly, one of the particular characteristics of the ESD or DESD discourses is that they have a strong ethical tone to them. Thus, the implementation plan talks much more of values than of economic issues or of growth,[5] while in the *Prospects*' Open File on 'Education for sustainable development', the guest editor, Lopez-Ospina, talks of 'sustainable development' being 'more a *moral precept* than a *scientific concept*, linked as much with notions of fairness as with theories of global warming'. He goes on to argue that sustainable development is 'primarily a matter of culture. It is connected with *values* people cherish and with the ways in which they perceive their relationships with others' (Lopez-Ospina, 2000, pp. 32–33. Italics in original).

Similarly, in a thoughtful discussion paper on 'Orienting technical and vocational education and training for sustainable development', by the UNESCO-UNEVOC Centre in Bonn, it is argued that 'sustainable development. . .is primarily a matter of culture: it is concerned with the values people cherish and with the ways in which we perceive our relationships with others and with the natural world' (UNEVOC, 2006, p. 5).[6]

It does, however, also admit that technical and vocational education and training is too often linked into 'productivism', providing skilled workers for industry, on the assumption of continued economic growth. The UNEVOC paper argues, by contrast, that TVET can also be linked to economic literacy, sustainable production and sustainable consumption, but only with massive gains in technological efficiency and with the 'dematerialisation of production and consumption' (UNEVOC, 2006, p. 16). However, the discussion paper is more concerned with how TVET courses can build in awareness of sustainable development than with the financial sustainability of providing education and skills for all, as part of the developing world's bid for modernisation.[7]

In the review of the first 2 years of DESD, it is nevertheless emphasised that this initiative is wider the specifically educational projects such as EFA and the UN Decade for Literacy 'as it tackles more than just education and addresses the way we live, our attitudes and values that impact the sustainability of not just our societies but our planet' (UNESCO, 2007, p. 7). Thus, though there is a concern with some of the many dimensions of sustainability, the focus is understandably more on the ethical and cultural perspectives of building global awareness than on the tensions between education expansion and economic growth: 'Furthermore, the [High Level] Panel stressed that the ethical dimension of

[3] See NORRAG NEWS No. 40 (2008).

[4] On the DESD website, there is just a sentence: 'Economy: a sensitivity to the limits and potential of economic growth and their impact on society and on the environment, with a commitment to assess personal and societal levels of consumption out of concern for the environment and for social justice.' International Implementation Scheme, downloaded from http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23280&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html, 3/9/2007.

[5] 'Understanding your own values, the values of the society you live in, and the values of others around the world is a central part of education for a sustainable future' (UNESCO, 2006, p. 7).

[6] See also Maclean 'Technical and vocational education and training: meeting the challenge of sustainable development' (2008).

[7] It suggests, for instance, including 'sustainable development concepts in all courses for everyone ('TVET for all')', without commenting on the sustainability of this (UNEVOC, 2006, p. 23). Intriguingly, economic growth occurs just once in 31 pages, while sustainable occurs 116 times!