



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Educational Development

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



Donor policies, practices and investment priorities in support of education, and post-2015 prospects: A review

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Development
Education
Donor
Policy
Practice
Investment priority

ABSTRACT

The Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011, whilst conceding that considerable progress towards education related goals had been made over the previous decade, reminded us that many challenges still remain. This article has been developed from a study commissioned by the European Commission in 2012 to examine the policies, practices and investment priorities of bilateral and multilateral agencies in support of education since 2002. The overriding development policy focus has been on poverty reduction and economic and social development; and education policy has been prepared in the firm belief that relevant good quality education for all is a crucial driver of overall development. But have there been any noticeable trends in policy and investment priorities? To what extent has evaluation of practice been able to feed into the policy making process? This article attempts to answer these and other questions. It derives lessons learned over the past decade and suggests ways in which these can guide development assistance to education in order to address both existing and emerging challenges from 2015 onwards.

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1. Introduction

In October 2011 the European Union (EU) renewed its development policy—*Increasing the impact of EU Development Policy: an Agenda for Change* (European Commission, 2011a)—in which it identified sectors which build the foundations for inclusive and sustainable growth for human development, most notably social protection, health and education. It further specified that at least 20% of EU funds would be allocated to social inclusion and human development. The European Council was called on to endorse the proposed *Agenda for Change* which sought to ‘equip the EU with high-impact development policy and practice for the coming decade and give it a leading role in setting a comprehensive international development agenda up to and beyond 2015’ (European Commission, 2011a, p. 12).

In order to investigate the best ways forward for the EU in supporting the education sector, a study on donor policies, practices and investment priorities was commissioned by the European Commission (EC). The study relied on a mixed set of methods, including a review of some 180 documents and articles, data analysis and some complementary semi-structured

interviews held in July 2012 with professionals in the education sector working in nine EU Member State aid agencies. It examined both the overall development policy or strategy documents of 22 development agencies—18 bilateral agencies, three multilateral agencies and UNICEF¹—and their education policy documents which dealt with the sector as a whole from early childhood education and development through to higher education, including technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and, in some cases, non-formal education. The period covered was mainly from 2005 to 2012, although some reference was made to earlier policies and strategies. For the discussion of investment priorities all OECD-DAC² countries were included and comparison was made between data from 2002–2003 and 2009–2010. Data from the OECD-DAC database were used as adjusted by the UNESCO Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report (GMR) team in

¹ The 18 bilateral agencies reviewed were: (in Europe) Austria, Denmark, European Union, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and United Kingdom; (outside Europe) Japan and United States. The three multilateral agencies reviewed were the African Development Bank (AfDB), the Asian Development Bank (AsDB) and the World Bank. Only one United Nations agency was reviewed, namely UNICEF. In this article, mention is also made of Australia.

² Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development – Development Assistance Committee.

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preparation for the 2012 GMR. Given that on average European governments change every four to six years, it is not always possible to relate stated policy directly with actual practice. Despite this, donor practices were examined through various in-house and independent evaluations of programmes in support of education.

This article summarises the findings of the study which was completed by the end of 2012. It also updates some of the findings, particularly with reference to policies or, at least, policy statements issued by donor agencies since September 2012. It is only latterly that donors, apart from the EU and the World Bank, have been considering post-2015 policy directions for fulfilling the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and for constructing post-MDG development agenda. This article makes no attempt to second guess what directions those individual agencies which have not yet issued a policy statement will take post-2015 but it does offer comments on the relationship between policies, practice and investment priorities, and on some of the conclusions reached at the EU High Level Conference on *Education and Development: From Challenges to Opportunities* held in Brussels on 23rd May 2013 (EC, 2013).

A note of clarification is needed first of all. In their assessment of Europe's Commitment to Development, [Barder et al. \(2013, p. 847, 848\)](#) point out that '[d]iscussions about the effects of rich countries on poor countries sometimes conflate *development policy* and *aid*. As well as aid, European countries affect developing countries through policies on migration, trade, the environment, security, transfers of technology and investment practices, and the scale of these effects on development may be much larger than the positive effect of aid... On some dimensions of the [Commitment to Development] index, such as aid and environment, Europe's consolidated record is encouraging and sets a good example. On others, such as encouraging trade and technology transfer, Europe performs poorly relative to the rest of the world.' The policies discussed below are for the most part "aid" policies rather than "development" policies in the broader sense.

2. Overall development cooperation policies

Policies on development cooperation (or aid) are important statements of intent whether or not they are translated directly into practice. In the same way that education processes and education systems do not occur in a vacuum, so we might assume that a policy to support educational development exists within or, even better, is integrated with an overall development cooperation policy. However, this has not always been the case if we look at the common features of such policies of the 22 agencies reviewed in the study—together representing 86% of total official development assistance (ODA) and 85% of total aid to education in 2010 (UNESCO, 2012b)—and the extent to which education is given priority. Findings from the review of these overall policies point to highly ambitious and 'crowded' donor agendas, including a wide range of policy areas. Five defining features emerge from the review: (i) poverty reduction; (ii) peace, security and stability; (iii) regional priorities; (iv) fragile and conflict affected states; and (v) education.

2.1. Poverty reduction

The majority of donors' overall development policies show a strong commitment to poverty reduction. Some, such as the EU, even go as far as stating that their primary objective is poverty eradication. Where poverty reduction is not mentioned specifically as the priority, the drive for economic development and wealth creation is foremost. For 16 donors sustainable development,

which includes economic and social progress, is also a high priority, together with a firm commitment to achieving the MDGs.

2.2. Peace, security and stability

A theme running through most development policies is the objective of ensuring peace and human security, especially by promoting democracy, the rule of law, human rights and good governance. The importance of good governance for development cooperation to succeed has gained greater prominence in donor policies over the past decade. On the one hand, the official budget support policy of the EU (EC, 2011b) ties budget support more strictly to the political conditions of the recipient country and, on the other, the [Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(2011b, p. 1\)](#) states categorically that they 'will give no budget support to countries where there is evidence of corruption, human rights violations or poor governance'.

2.3. Regional priorities

Donors have at several high level events, such as the UN MDG summits of 2005 and 2010 and the Gleneagles G8 meetings, manifested their commitment to achieving the MDGs in Africa by giving priority to the region in the allocation of aid resources. In June 2005, the Member States of the European Union agreed to double aid between 2004 and 2010, and allocate half of the increase to Africa (EC, 2005a, 2005b). The commitment to Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, was re-confirmed in 13 of the 22 development policies under review, with seven donor governments (Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Japan and the US) stipulating that Africa should receive the highest priority in development cooperation.

2.4. Fragile and conflict affected states

Whether in Africa or elsewhere, half of the donors make mention of the special challenges posed in fragile and conflict affected states. For example, the UK is developing a clearer focus on conflict prevention—putting 30% of its aid by 2014 into unstable states, supporting freer and fairer elections, giving people a voice and helping their governments to build essential services and maintain law and order (DFID, 2011, p. 20). Switzerland has also increased its commitment in fragile contexts, predominantly in Africa, South and South-East Asia and Haiti (SDC, 2012), and France aimed to allocate for the 2011–2013 three year period 10% of grant-aid for crisis and post-crisis management ([Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, 2011, p. 48](#)).

2.5. Education

2.5.1. Education as a priority

The importance of education as one of the drivers of economic and social development and one of the basic building blocks of every society is well-documented³ and widely acknowledged. (On the other hand, [Chang \(2010, p. 189\)](#) argues that more education does not lead to greater national prosperity and that 'far greater attention needs to be paid to the issue of establishing and upgrading productive enterprises and institutions that support them'.) For 17 of the 22 agencies in the study, education, often together with training and skills, is highlighted as an important area for development cooperation. In 12 cases the word "priority" or the phrase "key sector" is used when education and training are

³ For example, see the notes (and references) presented in DFID's latest education policy statement (DFID, 2013) and in the review of the Dutch contribution to basic education 1999–2009 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011a).

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