

Policy Brief

Technical and Vocational Skills Development

Introduction

Today, there is a sense that Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Skills Development [SD] are on the move once more. These two concepts can be combined under the term 'Technical and Vocational Skills Development' (TVSD) (see also below). The present issue of NORRAG NEWS covers a very wide range of different contexts in which TVSD are being analysed. It goes from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to Mexico, from China (and Hong Kong) to Nigeria, and from Vietnam to Chile. From South Africa to Latin America, and from Ghana to India. Equally, it includes a very good range of bilateral and multi-lateral agencies. Those reporting here are the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and JICA on the one hand; GTZ, DFID, and SDC, on the other; then, again, the IIEP, ILO and the European Training Foundation; there are 20 agency people and 20 academics contributing to this special issue...

Main challenges, findings and propositions

Technical and Vocational Skills Development are back on the agenda

Technical and Vocational Skills Development (TVSD) was a key sub-sector during the 1960s and early 1970s, and initiatives that had the objective of providing employable skills to ease school-leaver unemployment became popular in many countries especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. The 1980s rate of return and other studies undermined much external support for post-primary education, including TVSD, and in the 1990s the international policy debate on education was predominantly focused on basic education and Education for All (EFA). Little attention was placed on vocational skills; TVSD systems were often considered as obsolete, inefficient instruments. The same was certainly not true for Latin America or for East and South East Asia. There, TVSD continued to thrive during the 1980s and 1990s.

In the 2000s TVSD is back on the International Agenda. The belief that skill formation enhances productivity and sustains competitiveness in the global economy has been a strong motive. The rhetoric about the knowledge economy has further reinforced this trend. But government intervention is also often motivated by other factors such as the growing concern over what happens after primary education, or the need to provide a second chance to school drop-outs, offer an alternative to purely academic education or fight against youth unemployment and poverty.

Does this renewed interest in TVSD come with new insights?

To a certain extent, yes. The Commission for Africa report, Millennium Project and Summit, new World Bank policies on secondary, higher and general education, and on skills development, and the 2007 World Development Report (WDR) all argue that a holistic, integrated, inter-sectoral approach to education is crucial, including TVSD. DFID's 2006 briefing on 'secondary, vocational and higher' makes the same point. Also new is the move away from the classical, mainly school-oriented approach of TVET to that of a larger concept of skills development, including work and life skills, which can be acquired through a combination of formal education, competency-based training, non-formal and informal learning. Hence our new composite term, TVSD. The 2007 WDR has gone to the extreme of arguing that the training should give the students a solid foundation in behavioural skills being very close to life skills. The value of vocational or technical skill is not mentioned in the WDR. The overall message of the WDR for the curriculum of schools is that the labour markets are demanding workers who have 'strong thinking and interpersonal skills'. This may certainly be true for well developed and technologically advanced economies but can hardly be valid for economies that rely on skills for productive activities and for the poor that have to make a living in micro-economies.

But also governments have not stopped thinking about improving the transition from schools to work. In the wave of public sector reforms, governments in many countries are in the process of adopting reforms aimed at making technical and vocational education more flexible, of a higher quality and capable of responding better and more rapidly to the needs of the labour market while, at the same time, improving cost and efficiency. Some governments have actively sought to involve the private sector in TVSD as is the case in Chile where the government made key national associations of enterprises take responsibility for administering (with public resources) a small set of technical schools (70 out of more than 500 at the time). It has helped to raise the commitment to education among representative leaders of the productive sector and in the curriculum reform process.

What has not changed over time is the diversification of TVSD, both regarding the relative size and the organisation of vocational education in relation to the school system. Many countries combine vocational schools with dual forms of training such as apprenticeship, which can either be school-based or company-based or a combination of school-based vocational education followed by apprenticeship. Outside the education system, many forms of training are applied in the informal and un-registered sector, ranging from traditional skills training through apprenticeship to NGO-run community polytechnics (India).

Does TVSD payoff in facilitating the transition to work?

The answer from rigorous evaluations is that it can under the right conditions. The many benefits claimed for TVSD (e.g. higher productivity, readiness for technological change, openness to new forms of work organization, and the capacity to attract foreign direct investment) all depend on the quality of the skills acquired, but also a dynamic environment in which they can be applied. A dynamic, expanding economy is one of the most critical factors in creating opportunities for work and employment. And fair allocation of skills to work is dependent on good governance. In South Korea and China, there has been employment for TVSD graduates of almost all institutions; while in a stagnant economy like Sri Lanka, there may only be jobs for some of the very best students. But also building TVSD on a strong foundation of general education, and pushing vocational content later in the secondary and post-secondary curriculum show evidence of higher benefits in relation to costs.

Does TVSD contribute to poverty reduction?

There is mounting evidence that the poor are not to be found in the majority of the pathways to skills development, with the exception of NGO non-profit programmes. The vogue for market-led, demand-driven courses is likely to exclude the poor. More policy attention needs to be given to bursaries and merit-based pathways to skill for youth from poor families. Nevertheless, the outcomes of this training will not only depend on its quality but also on the state of the enabling environment (social, economic, cultural, political) surrounding schools and skill centres.

Challenges

The contributions in this NN38 express the conviction that TVSD is a powerful instrument for creating employment opportunities and pro-poor economic growth provided it is complemented by active labour market policies and business promotion measures. The state needs to have a vision of its own technological, agricultural and industrial development, and of how the education and training system relates to this vision. And, this vision needs to be backed by substantial financial support. Some Asian countries have been able to strike an effective balance in policies and strategies, but many others still need to develop such a framework.

The private sector needs to be engaged with such forward planning, and employers need to be convinced that the utilisation of trained and skilled young people is actually a better investment than relying on time-honoured systems of taking on unskilled, casual labour.

The linkages and synergies with basic education need to be enhanced, and TVSD systems should be more flexible, and become more successful in attracting more private training providers.

The knowledge base on TVSD programmes and practices needs to be enlarged. The sector is very diversified and a good understanding of the challenges raised by so many of the articles in NN38 is needed to be able to develop, implement and monitor effective interventions and programmes. This understanding should not only be present in national governmental and non-governmental organizations, but also be developed and maintained among the staff of the donor agencies.

Donors and national governments need increasingly to monitor, assess and disseminate their research and consultancy insights on this complex but crucial sector. The Working Group for International Cooperation in Skills Development is one vehicle for just such knowledge-sharing. But there is a need for skills development to receive wider policy attention, and a UNESCO Global Monitoring Report on TVSD is long overdue. Related to the need to monitor and assess TVSD is need for a better statistical base for TVSD, including for the largest dimension of TVSD; that which occurs informally on-the-job.

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