

POLICY BRIEF FOR NORRAG NEWS 40

EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT? OR, THE SUSTAINABILITY OF EDUCATION INVESTMENT?

This special issue covers many different dimensions of education in its relations with sustainability. Education and sustainability are inextricably linked in many different ways. Some authors in this issue are concerned with sustained economic development. Which is obviously not the same as sustainable economic growth. Others interrogate the sustainability of external aid and its close connections with key concepts like local ownership and with aid dependency. Others again look at the small-scale innovative project or programme, and wonder if it can be justified in its own terms, and not only if it succeeds in being scaled up. In other words, are some things not still eminently valuable even if they can't be sustained in the short term by local resources?

Can education be a driver of development?

This seems to be a generally accepted truism. While economic and political policies have usually been the more important drivers of development, for many education has been a necessary, if not sufficient, component. Achieving high quality mass education is expected to bring marginalised and rural populations within the mainstream of national development. The expansion of secondary, technical and higher education will then create the skills needed for sustained economic growth.

On the other hand, weaknesses in the assumptions of the current educational development philosophies and strategies are highlighted by some authors. Two perspectives emerge: the economic and the cultural. Questions are raised about the validity of the 'human capital' argument of educational investments which is championed by many influential donors. In these views education is more and more framed and represented as a key social policy, the 'magic wand' to solve poverty and, very often, the best policy to achieve social equity. However, promoting education from this perspective allows the social to be addressed while avoiding deep policies of economic redistribution, such as a progressive fiscal reform.

Others argue that the key to sustainable development lies in 'culture' which would warrant education to be aligned with the culture, values, local knowledge and conditions of the students. Instead of persistently focusing on economic and political prescriptions over and above local culture(s), it would be much better to involve indigenous knowledge systems as a potential tool in sustainable development and to tailor teaching and training methodologies to the expectations and local practices of the learners. Unless they are related to the life of the people, the success of education programmes is often elusive.

Can education support sustained economic growth?

Donors and national governments have come to realize that sustained momentum on Education for All needs to be combined with a sectorwide approach to education, and with other multi-sectoral investments. The very success of EFA has been producing some of the largest cohorts of young school leavers ever recorded in some countries has generated an intense debate about 'Education for what?' as many school leavers will not find gainful employment.

The key to sustainable development is finding approaches to development that balance economic and social progress, address cultural differences, and respect ecological values and limits is the key to sustainable development. This challenges the contents, delivery and funding of education.

Can external aid lead to sustainable education investment?

While there has been some very thorough work on analysing progress towards the Dakar Goals, there has been much less attention to the sustainability of these externally-assisted achievements. In the World Bank's Education Sector Strategy Update (ESSU) of 2005 there is an explicit concern with the emergence of aid dependency especially in the poorest countries of Africa with stagnating economies. Will countries which have been assisted to reach universal primary education be able to sustain this when development assistance is terminated? Do individual countries have an economic and political environment that will continue to secure their achievement?

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?

A number of authors write about the effects of free education in connection with sustainability. In poor countries free primary education certainly removed the financial burden from community members, and has considerably increased access. However, this policy has also led to the reduction of the actual participation of community members in school management on the ground which undermines the sustainability of educational finance. Shared ownership seems to be the key word for sustainability here because under hardship, where both governmental and other resources are limited and less reliable, the participation of parents and the community in school management is a key element for sustaining primary education for their children.

Is more or less external aid needed to promote national development and lower the risk of aid creating harmful dependency and not being sustainable?

More questions?

The contributions in this issue of NORRAG News suggest 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, at the same time.