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POLICY BRIEF - MAY 2013

2012: THE YEAR OF GLOBAL REPORTS ON TVET, SKILLS & JOBS. CONSENSUS OR DIVERSITY?

It really rained “skills” reports in 2012!

This special issue of NORRAG News is devoted to TVET, skills and jobs. The reason for selecting this topic is twofold. First, 2012 was the year in which many (global) reports were published on skills and jobs by the World Bank Group, UNESCO, OECD, the International Labour Organisation, the G20, McKinsey and others. Second, discussions are gaining momentum about future development agendas post-2015, including the future of the EFA Goals and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) after that date. It may be surprising when so many global reports have focused on Skills, TVET, Employment and Jobs in 2012 that this does not (yet) seem to have translated into clear proposals for goals or targets on TVET or skills for the next development agenda. The question may be raised whether there is a case for what may be called ‘a skills goal’ in the global development agenda.

A matter of definition

The contributions in NN 48 point at the broad nature, in terms of objectives, modalities and target groups, of ‘skills training’ as the main reason why it has not become a clear development target. Skills training covers the whole gamut from formal, informal to non-formal provision, is delivered in schools, institutions, colleges and universities, and enterprises, and is both public and private (for and not for profit). Not surprisingly, EFA goal 3’s (“life skills”) is a notoriously vague term that has never been able to be monitored and tracked, partly because the international community never really agreed what it is.

The reports which appeared in 2012 and which are discussed in NN 48 illustrate that the notion of skills still carries many and very differing meanings. The 2012 EFA Global Monitoring Report remains caught between a work-oriented notion of skill and a notion of life skills, foundation and transferable skills. The World Development Report (WDR 2013) of The World Bank emphasizes that it is not just an economic investment environment that is vital for skills (and jobs) but also a ‘nurturing environment’ from the womb thru the early years, as well as a social, institutional and political environment. The ADB takes the view with its *Good practice in TVET* that skills are a necessary but not sufficient condition for economic growth and greater productivity.

The OECD’s (2012) *Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives* report focuses on adult skills, which include literacy, numeracy, problem-solving in technology-rich environments and skills used in workplaces. While for McKinsey’s *Jobs, Pay and Skills*, skills mostly just means education: high-skill refers to workers with a tertiary education or more, medium-skill refers to workers with only a secondary education, and low-skill refers to workers with no more than a primary education.

Despite this variation in definitions it seems evident that a narrow focus on the purpose of skills training leads to development which is unbalanced and not inclusive. Skills training is not only important for poverty reduction and economic development but it is also valuable as far as the enrichment of the quality of life is concerned. This is a point of view that is also expressed in the Shanghai Consensus reached at the Third International Congress on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (May 2012) which emphasized the necessity of rethinking TVET learning for broader human development needs, and not just to respond to the demand for immediate work skills.

In pursuit of evidence

A number of authors deplore the fact that the reports do not provide the ‘wisdom’ often sought by policy makers in developing countries on key issues of concern; this is impeded by a lack of a solid body of TVET research, at both basic and applied levels.

However, the reports reflect the still emerging maturity of TVET research despite the fact that there are many gaps in the foundations of good basic research (e.g. lack of theoretical agreement on even core terms, lack of solid base of international data) and large gaps in applied research (e.g. large scale studies to find answers to pressing problems). The GMR has done a good job in finding meaning in existing forms of data but has not been able to cover the major gaps that still exist in data collection. This would require building national capacities both to generate and use data.

Learning from experiences

Quite a number of contributions point at good practices that may inspire the future of TVET and skills training. One good practice that stands out is the coupling of skills training with directly relevant market needs and/or commercial opportunities. However, for this to happen, an organised private sector and mutual trust between private and public sector actors are required.

Korea’s fast economic development serves as an example, although it may not be replicable in any other country. Korea created an enabling environment for TVET which comprised strong leadership, good policies, an efficient mobilization of human resources, and had the good fortune of the existence of friendly international markets and massive foreign direct investment. The Korean government made a strong effort to improve awareness of TVET in students and parents in the 1960s-90s by providing many incentives such as scholarships and high salaries for teachers. It makes clear that development is not just an issue of money, but also of governance. Government commitment and sustainable and inclusive policies are key.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships are regarded as key features of models that successfully deliver critical skills for work or life which ensure relevance of content, effectiveness in pedagogy and sustainability in financing.

Pending work

Reading through the many different articles suggests an agenda for greater effectiveness of TVET and skills training in a global context. There is a clear need for an agreement on concepts and definitions, more and better research to provide a solid base for analysis and policy development, and studies which can inform TVET policy makers and practitioners in developing countries on good practices.

As for the post-2015 agendas, it is sometimes felt to be instrumental when technical and vocational skills are mentioned in the new frameworks and associated goals. However, in this context it is important that international goals for skills development are more precisely defined and that targets and indicators are agreed upon which can be readily monitored.

It will not be easy to agree on clear global skills goals as local contexts, demands and opportunities widely differ. Maybe an attempt should be made to define what key aspects of skills and jobs can be addressed through coordinated global action and captured in specific targets.

This Policy Brief was elaborated by Ad Boeren (Nuffic) and is based on NORRAG NEWS n°48 published in April 2013. NORRAG NEWS (NN) is a biannual newsletter, edited by Professor Kenneth King, which critically examines a specific theme in the field of aid and international policy development in education and training. It is freely available in English, French and Spanish on the NORRAG website: www.norrag.org



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