

Article for  
Learning for Development

## **What Learning for What Development?**

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### Abstract

After reviewing the evolution of attitudes to poverty and education we note how it influenced the early provision of schooling and the emergence of a global agenda for international development and universal education. At first this agenda was grounded in the Enlightenment values that inspired the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but economic arguments for reducing poverty and expanding education became more prominent towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sen's notion of development as freedom brings these ideas together and will strongly influence the development agenda for the coming decades. Implementing this agenda will require a shift from top-down donor-driven projects to grassroots approaches that take advantage of mobile technologies.

### Introduction: the evolution of attitudes to poverty and education

For most people development means less poverty and learning means more education. Today each seems self-evidently 'a good thing', but we should remember that these beliefs are quite recent.

In the case of poverty Ravallion (2013) found that it was not until the 1990s that 'a coherent theoretical framework emerged to show how high levels of poverty stifled investment and innovation'. The World Bank adopted the motto 'our dream is a world free of poverty' in 1990.

Ancient observations about poverty include Jesus Christ's statement that 'the poor you will always have with you' (Matt. 26:11, Mark 14:17, & John 12:8). He was likely recalling the Old Testament statement: 'For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you: You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land' (Deut. 15:11).

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, some economic thinkers argued against following such injunctions to palliate poverty because they regarded poor people as instrumental in ensuring economic development. For Bernard de Mandeville it was 'manifest that in a free nation where slaves are not allow'd of, the surest wealth consists of a multitude of laborious poor... and great numbers of them should be ignorant as well as poor' (de Mandeville, 1728). Later in that century Adam Smith argued for a more humane view and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Alfred Marshall (1890) pleaded 'may we not outgrow the belief that poverty is necessary?'

20<sup>th</sup> century economists, notably John Maynard Keynes, buttressed this plea by arguing that reducing poverty would aid growth because of the extra consumption it would

generate. Others, having showed that low levels of education, health and nutrition could keep people stuck in penury, urged that subsidizing education and health care were not only intrinsically desirable but helped people to break out of poverty (The Economist, 2013).

As well as having a humane view of the evil of poverty, Adam Smith (1776) was also an early proponent of the importance of learning. In *The Wealth of Nations* he argued for universal education on the grounds of public order and the preservation of freedom: ‘An instructed and intelligent people... are always more decent and orderly than an ignorant and stupid one... In free countries, where the safety of government depends very much upon the favourable judgment which the people may form of its conduct, it must surely be of the highest importance that they should not be disposed to judge rashly or capriciously concerning it.’

As with poverty, the translation of Smith’s views on education into action by governments to create school systems took another hundred years, but by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century some leading countries had legislated for education. In Meiji Japan an Education Act was issued in 1872. Its main objective was to provide education to everybody, regardless of status and gender, so that the whole population would be able to enjoy happiness and prosperity equally. The Act stated that ‘learning is the key to success in life, and no man can afford to neglect it. ... everyone should subordinate all other matters to the education of his children. ...henceforth, through out the land, without distinction of class and sex, in no village shall there be a house without learning, in no house an ignorant person’ (Pyle, 1969, p.33).

Across the Pacific in the United States, the first compulsory school attendance act had been passed by Massachusetts in 1852. It reflected the view that in a heterogeneous society the masses had to be educated in order to understand the written codes of the governing laws and documents of the new country. Compulsory education was enacted in Britain in 1880. In 1881, under the short presidency of Jules Ferry, France introduced universal primary schooling that was ‘secular, free and compulsory’ and open to both boys and girls. In 1882 further legislation made schooling compulsory for children aged 7 to 13 (CNED, 2008:7).

However, to equate the expansion of education with the enactment of legislation and the establishment of state schooling systems, as most historians do, is to miss important initiatives to encourage learning in earlier times. West (1994) claimed that in Britain and some other western countries universal primary education was achieved predominantly through private schools. For example, writing in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1813 James Mill, the father of John Stuart Mill, wrote of ‘the rapid progress which the love of education is making among the lower orders in England. Even around London... which is far from the most instructed and virtuous part of the kingdom, there is hardly a village

that has not something of a school, and not many children of either sex who are not taught more or less, reading and writing' (Tooley, 2009:237).

Tooley quotes this example in his iconoclastic work *The Beautiful Tree*. The title is from a speech by Mahatma Gandhi at Chatham House, London in 1931. He said: 'I say without fear of my figures being challenged successfully, that today India is more illiterate than it was fifty or a hundred years ago, and so is Burma, because the British administrators, when they came to India, instead of taking hold of things as they were, began to root them out. They scratched the soil and began to look at the root, and left the root like that, and the beautiful tree perished' (2009:212). Tooley adds that the peer-teaching methods used in these indigenous Indian private schools were being copied in schools in England early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and influenced Pestalozzi (2009:230).

### Global agendas for international development and universal education

Whatever the considerable merits of such indigenous private education systems, the colonial powers introduced systems of government schools in most developing countries. At independence these systems were taken over and developed further by the new governments. They naturally became the focus of attention for the intergovernmental bodies, particularly UNESCO, the World Bank and the OECD, which tried to help governments expand and improve education. Indeed, until very recently UNESCO and many of its member governments automatically assumed that if education is a public good it must be provided free by the state as a public service. This was the prevailing ethos when the international community began to take steps to fulfil the aspiration of education for all that figures in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states:

*'Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.'*

*'Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.'*

*'Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.'* (United Nations General Assembly, 1948)

The 'rights-based' principle articulated in this Declaration continues to provide the fundamental rationale for the expansion of education and the pursuit of other development goals. The Enlightenment-inspired idealism that led to the creation of the United Nations and this Declaration of Human Rights after World War II was also an important factor supporting the wave of decolonisation that gathered speed from the

1950s. Many newly independent countries made heroic efforts to expand education and pursue other civil development goals.

However, the harsh realities of the Cold War, its accompanying arms race and the global energy upsets of the 1970s hindered the attainment of these goals both directly, by weakening economies, and indirectly by undermining democracy and governance in many states. By the late 1980s, when it became clear that educational development was going backwards in many poor countries, the world decided that concerted action was needed. The term ‘international development’ gained currency to describe the attempts by richer countries to help poorer countries, both individually through national agencies and collectively through intergovernmental bodies.

The figures were stark. In 1985 some 105 million children aged between six and eleven were not in school, the majority of them girls. Economic recessions and financial crises in various developing countries were eroding the increases in school enrolments and literacy rates achieved in the 1970s. Forecasts suggested that the number of out-of-school children might double to 200 million by 2000. ‘Given the centrality of education to countries’ economic and social growth this did not bode well for world development’, noted the World Bank (2000:3).

In 1990 four agencies of the UN system [UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund) UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and the World Bank] convened the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand.

Its purpose was to stimulate international commitment to a new and broader vision of basic education: to ‘meet the basic learning needs of all, to equip people with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes they need to live in dignity, to continue learning and to contribute to the development of their communities and nations’ (ibid.).

The outcome of Jomtien was a set of six targets, adopted by 155 governments, 33 intergovernmental bodies and 125 non-governmental organisations that were to be reached by the year 2000. The targets addressed, in summary:

- The expansion of early childhood care.
- Universal completion of primary education.
- Improvement in learning achievement (with targets).
- Reduction of adult illiteracy.
- Expanded training in essential skills for youth and adults.
- General education for sustainable development.

This first concerted international effort to get all children into school showed how difficult it is for such ‘top-down’ initiatives to achieve success. Despite follow-up efforts the targets were not achieved. In absolute terms the world went backwards. In 1990 100

million children aged 6 to 11 were not in school and by 2000 this number had grown to 125 million.

Various reasons were adduced to explain failure. Six major changes affected education during the 1990s. First, population growth – notably a 25% increase in the number of 6 to 14 year-olds in Africa and a 15% increase in South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific – had moved the goalposts out of reach. Second, many countries were afflicted by conflict and natural disasters. Third, HIV/AIDS began to reverse the development gains of previous decades and had particularly dire effects on education systems as children became AIDS orphans and teachers died. Fourth, because of the break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia there were 20% more countries in the world by 2000 and education systems that had previously provided relatively complete coverage had been broken up. Fifth, there were major economic crises in many countries in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. Finally, the exponential rise of communication technologies created a ‘digital divide’ that further increased the disparities between developed and developing countries.

The World Bank concluded: ‘Six developments of the 1990s impacted strongly on education and have forced a fundamental rethinking of EFA, its role, goals and means as part of the end of decade review. Clearly EFA can no longer be attained through business as usual, with the usual players. Even if all the firm commitments made in 1990 had been met, efforts during the 1990s would have proved inadequate’ (World Bank, 2000:9).

Others went further and questioned the basis of the approach. In the words of Easterly (2001:73): ‘The failure of government-sponsored educational growth is once again due to our motto: people respond to incentives. If the incentives to invest in the future are not there, expanding education is worth little. Having the government force you to go to school does not change your incentives to invest in the future. Creating people with high skills in countries where the only profitable activity is lobbying the government for favours is not a formula for success. Creating skills where there exists no technology to use them is not going to foster economic growth’ (Easterly, 2001:73). The on-going debate about development, of which this is an example, spawned much research on the link between educational expansion and economic development.

Meanwhile, it seemed that the international community was still trying to achieve EFA through business as usual by convening another World Forum on Education for All in Dakar, Senegal in 2000. Once again a set of six targets were agreed with 2015 as the most common deadline (UNESCO, 2000). There were, however, two important differences compared to Jomtien.

First, the World Bank (2000:15) claimed that it had ‘distilled at least eight core lessons from the past decade, which can help renew the final push towards EFA’. These were:

- Strong political commitment at the country level is the cornerstone of success.
- Quality is as important as quantity.

- Governments cannot deliver on EFA alone – partnerships with families and civil society are essential.
- Countries make better progress when they have developed sector policy frameworks that treat all levels and forms of education comprehensively.
- Inefficient use of education resources constrains progress, notably the failure to allocate funds for learning materials and in-service teacher training, both of which have a major influence on quality.
- Education must adapt quickly to new economic, technological and social challenges, such as the increased role of markets and information technology.
- Education must be cushioned during crises.
- Education expansion needs to be supported by a growing economy.

While most of these lessons may seem rather obvious, they did help to make the post-2000 EFA campaign more focussed than the efforts of the 1990s. The beneficial influence of learning materials and in-service teacher education on quality was an important theme.

Second, the renewed EFA campaign was set in the wider context of the Millennium Declaration agreed by the world's heads of government at the United Nations in 2000. In this they committed their governments to eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that included, in summary form, two of the Dakar Goals:

- Achieve universal primary education:  
Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.
- Promote gender equality and empower women:  
Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015.

UNESCO was charged with coordinating the implementation of the Dakar agenda but the World Bank had the overall responsibility for the MDGs. Inevitably, and probably rightly, this meant that vastly more resources were directed to the two goals given above than to the four other Dakar goals. These four addressed early childhood care and education, life-skills programmes for youth and adults, adult literacy and education, and improving quality at all levels by focusing on learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2000:15).

I describe elsewhere the mechanisms, such as the Fast-Track Initiative, that were put in place to coordinate the work of the national and international development agencies after 2000. Although some significant countries (e.g. Nigeria, Pakistan) are unlikely to achieve the MDG of Universal Primary Education by the target date of 2015, in most cases progress has been considerable, which has moved the challenge of universal schooling to the secondary level (Daniel, 2010).

What learning for what development?

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as bodies like the World Bank began to take an interest in what they called ‘human capital development’, the focus of arguments justifying the expansion of education acquired an economic spin. By 1990, when the Jomtien Conference convened, the notion that education contributed to economic growth had become a truism.

We noted earlier that the emergence of global agendas for educational expansion provided incentives for research on the links between learning and development, particularly economic development. What does this research tell us and how has it influenced views on how development should be defined and how learning can help to achieve it?

Easterly (2001:84) reviewed the relationships between economic development and a number of measures of educational expansion. Having found little correlation between economic growth and the expansion of primary education, he reviewed Mankiw’s (1995) claim for a stronger correlation with the expansion of secondary enrolment but showed that this did not hold up either. Pscharopoulos (2008) presented a 50-year recap of research on the relative importance of various levels of education to economic growth in which he suggested that early childhood education was now the key factor. Given the confusion, Easterly had concluded that ‘education is another magic formula that has failed us on the quest for growth’. Hanushek & Wössmann (2007) were less dismissive but indicated that what counts is not a particular level of schooling but the quality of education on offer and the learning outcomes achieved.

Amartya Sen (1999) argued for a more holistic perspective on the role of education in development. For him the search for a single magic bullet to destroy poverty and create steady economic growth is an illusion. He argued that: ‘The case for taking a broad and many-sided approach to development has become clearer in recent years, partly as a result of the difficulties faced as well as successes achieved by different countries over the recent decades. These issues relate closely to the need for balancing the role of the government – and of other political and social institutions – with the functioning of markets’ (Sen, 1999:126).

Even the World Bank, in which the search for single all-purpose drivers of development had a strong hold on professional thinking for several decades, has come around to the need for an integrated and multifaceted approach (Stiglitz, 1998).

Sen’s integrated approach is based on the concept of development as freedom. For him development is a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. This broad process embraces all narrower views of development such as growth of individual incomes, facilities for education and health care, civil rights, technological progress and social modernisation. Viewing development as the expansion of freedoms puts the focus on the purposes that make development important rather than on some of the means of achieving it.

Freedom is central to the process of development for two distinct but complementary reasons. The first reason is evaluative: the primary assessment of the progress of development is whether the freedoms that people have are enhanced. The second reason is effectiveness, because the ‘achievement of development is thoroughly dependent on the free agency of people’ (Sen, 1999:4).

Such a broad approach to development gives a vital role to education even if the expansion of schooling in a particular jurisdiction does not give an immediate economic pay-off. The history of Japan and other East Asian countries shows that universal education should be seen as a basis for economic development rather than its cause. Those economies greatly expanded education (and health care) before they broke out of poverty. But once other factors were favourable for economic growth the good levels of education and literacy allowed these countries to develop rapidly. Sen (1999:42) argues that once it adopted a form of market economics China grew more rapidly than India because it already had higher levels of education and health care.

Today, examples of jurisdictions as diverse as Cuba and the Indian state of Kerala show that high levels of literacy and health care do not of themselves create economic growth. Experience suggests, however, that if such jurisdictions were to adopt economic policies that favoured growth they would develop more strongly than others starting without such a base. Political and economic freedoms promote economic growth.

Considering development as freedom makes education a constituent component of development as well as a means for promoting it. Education fosters some freedoms directly and, since freedoms strengthen each other, it has a knock-on effect that promotes development generally. The notion of agency also helps to change the concept of development from a process that is imposed on people by governments and development organizations to something that they do for themselves. This goes further than Easterly’s (2006) contention that development occurs when people respond to incentives and not as the result of any grand plan imposed from above. Free human beings have their own aspirations.

Sen (1999:199, 220) illustrates this rather nicely by pointing out that because of its strong emphasis on women’s education the birth rate in the Indian state of Kerala has fallen faster than in China with its coercive one-child policy. Educating women is a good example of education being a constituent of development since its effect in reducing both fertility and infant mortality has been widely demonstrated. Cohen (2007, 2008) argues that girls’ education is the surest route to sustaining a liveable planet.

We conclude that educating people is a vital component of development. It should not be seen primarily as the creation of human capital for the purpose of economic production, but as the nurturing of human capability that gives people the freedoms to lead worthwhile lives. This suggests that education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century should develop their

capacity to become self-directed learners, which is a major change from the focus on teaching and rote learning that still passes for education in some developing countries.

### Learning for development in the future

Although 2015 is the target date for most of the MDGs we can already make a preliminary assessment of their impact. In summary, since 2000 we have seen the most significant reduction ever of the numbers living in poverty and the campaign for universal primary education has been fairly successful. The picture is less rosy for the health targets.

In view of these results the UN is preparing proposals for a new set of development goals with target dates of 2030. A high-level panel made up of three heads of government (Indonesia, Liberia and UK) reviewed the experience of the MDGs and made some preliminary proposals for new goals (United Nations, 2013). Its assessment of the MDGs provides the springboard for its own proposals:

‘They did not focus enough on reaching the very poorest and most excluded people. They were silent on the devastating effects of conflict and violence on development. The importance to development of good governance and institutions that guarantee the rule of law, free speech and open and accountable government was not included, nor the need for inclusive growth to provide jobs. Most seriously, the MDGs fell short by not integrating the economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainable development as envisaged in the Millennium Declaration, and by not addressing the need to promote sustainable patterns of consumption and production.’

These conclusions pick up some of the themes of the EFA global monitoring reports that UNESCO publishes annually, in particular the 2009 report, which was titled *Overcoming inequality: why governance matters* (UNESCO, 2008). Furthermore, we can detect in this assessment, and particularly in the panel’s suggestions for 12 new goals, a shift from the mainly economic view of development that inspired the MDGs towards Sen’s concept of development as freedom.

There will be many inputs to this goal-defining process before a list is presented for UN approval. For example, the Centre for International Governance Innovation has proposed its own ‘Bellagio Goals’ (CIGI, 2013) and HelpAge International (2013) has urged the inclusion of a goal related to ageing populations.

We note that the panel’s proposed goals for education and work pick up some of the goals of the 2000 Dakar EFA Framework that did not figure in the MDGs (UNESCO, 2000:15). They also emphasise lifelong learning, which did not feature explicitly in that framework. Their educational goals urge more pre-primary education and lower-secondary education, stress the importance of learning outcomes at all levels and call for increasing opportunities to acquire skills for work. Concerning work, the goals call for increasing the number of solid jobs, decreasing the number of young people not in

education, employment or training, strengthening productive capacity by providing universal access to financial services, transportation and ICT, and increasing the numbers of new start-up companies through an enabling business environment that promotes entrepreneurship.

Implicit in the plans for achieving the 2000 MDGs was considerable reliance on the actions of governments and intergovernmental agencies. Whatever the content of any development goals eventually approved by the UN for the period 2015-2030, they will certainly rely for their attainment on actions by a more diffuse partnership giving greater roles to individuals, communities and institutions. This is partly because rich-country governments are most unlikely, for example, to donate major funds to a new global campaign for secondary education as they did for universal primary education. More positively, it also reflects a greater appreciation of the importance of what Sen calls the 'free agency of people' in determining and guiding their own development as individuals and communities. In other words, development will become more bottom-up and less top-down.

#### From top-down to bottom-up

Until recently large donor-funded development projects based on an idea emanating from research by an international agency or a developed-country think tank were fashionable. A good example, with a big ego thrown in, was the Millennium Villages project masterminded by Jeffrey Sachs of the Earth Institute and launched in 2005 (Wikipedia, 2013).

This is not the place to review the project properly, but the controversy it has generated suggests that this model of intervention may have run its course. Easterly (2005), a long-time critic of big top-down development projects, contested the principles on which it is based. More serious is the recent debate sparked by Clemens (2012) over the absence of any proper evaluation data to buttress the large claims made by the project, a debate that made it to the pages of *Nature* (Murphy, 2011; Retraction Watch, 2012)

An example of a contrasting approach to development through a bottom-up approach is the programme of Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F) that that Commonwealth of Learning has refined with village communities around the world for over a decade (Balasubramanian & Daniel, 2011). It is based on four principles that resonate strongly with those that inspired the UN panel's report:

- Unexploitative contractual relationships between rural producers and the public and private sectors to promote rural entrepreneurship;
- Learning as a self-sustaining process that draws in secondary stakeholders to support lifelong learning for farmers because they benefit too. In particular, appropriate capacity building improves the performance of rural credit and encourages the banking sector to support the approach;

- Capacity building also enlarges the market for bank credit among marginalized sections of the rural poor, particularly women;
- Through structures such as rural Internet kiosks, rural tele-centres, mobile phones and community radio, ICTs can facilitate the capacity building process acceptably and effectively.

This is just one instance, taken from the field of agriculture and rural development, of an approach that gives people the chance to determine the goals for their own development and the lifelong learning projects that can help to achieve them. This programme has been carefully evaluated and shows high returns on the very small investment of external funds, as well as substantial improvements in prosperity that are not matched in ‘control’ villages where L3F was not implemented. The project has also pioneered the mass use of mobile technologies in support of learning.

An important question is whether this grassroots approach can be used in future to filter, refine and implement some of the ‘big ideas’ for development that will continue to come from researchers and think tanks. An interesting test case could be the campaign to arrest desertification inspired by the work of Alan Savory (Savory Institute, 2013; Savory, 2013). Savory’s theories about the benefits of the holistic management of grazing are contested (Maughan, 2013; McWilliams, 2013) and the likely truth is that they may work in some cases but not in others.

At present the Savory Institute seems to be attempting to spread the practice of holistic management through a top-down approach. Switching to a bottom-up approach along the lines of the Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme could be a more effective way to test the theory and find out where it works and where it does not. Refining global ideas through local experience in this way will enable communities to take charge of their own development and seek the information they need to implement it.

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