Post-Basic Education and Training: Education and Poverty - Beyond the Basics

Beyond basic education: how post-basic learning can make education sustainable and valuable. Lessons from Sub-Saharan Africa and India

Overview Policy Brief

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The challenge

Many of the poorest countries have made quick progress towards providing access to primary education for all citizens. Foreign donors have increased their support to the provision and monitoring of this. Sometimes this has meant shifting both donor and government funds away from other levels of education. Our six-country study (India, Ghana, Rwanda, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania) shows that much of this effort could be wasted, and even directly damaging to the interests of poor people, if there is inadequate complementary attention paid to systems of post-basic education and training (PBET). Even if poor people had access to good quality primary education at minimal cost, they would be rational in rejecting it if post-basic learning systems are weak, or the socio-economic context didn't reward those who complete primary education. Without questioning the intrinsic value of Universal Primary Education (UPE), we are here concerned with the challenges of providing further education and supportive contexts that make primary education sustainable and valuable.

We emphasise here the potential *indirect* educational contributions to poverty reduction. Even if PBET is largely inaccessible to poor people, it can still make two kinds of indirect contribution to poverty reduction, one within and one beyond the education sector. First, PBET is essential to the wider educational environment that makes basic education possible and sustainable. Maintenance and improvement activities in this educational *delivery context* include training teachers, developing new curricula, training educational managers and supervisors at all levels, and ensuring that parents and children see clear evidence of improved opportunities at the post-basic level. Secondly, PBET makes vital contributions to the wider non-educational environment – e.g. training agricultural and health professionals, employment creation, developing a knowledge economy, stimulating economic growth and promoting innovation, inventiveness and research that catalyses education-developmental outcomes at all levels of education. For poverty reduction to occur, PBET must contribute to this *transformative context* which allows knowledge and skills to translate into developmental outcomes.

Simple targets and complex systems

There is clear consensus on the desirability and achievability of UPE. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and documents on the right to education remind us that UPE is a core component in poverty eradication, or at least in poverty alleviation, and in the realisation of human rights. It is also assumed that it will normally lead to other dimensions of poverty reduction and broader development. There is little consensus, however, on how to ensure the sustainable aid-independent delivery of education, or on how to facilitate transformations from primary education into the various developmental benefits needed for poverty eradication.

Among those priorities, the provision of opportunities for further learning (academic, vocational, and life skills) must surely loom large. Recognising the complexity involved in the simple UPE target means taking the *delivery context* seriously, i.e. looking at factors that will ensure or inhibit the sustainable provision of the education system itself. Primary education systems can't be sustained without a reliable supply of educational providers trained at secondary and tertiary levels, or without realistic expectations that good primary performers will be able to progress to good secondary education. Promoting an education system optimised for poverty reduction means also exploring the *transformative context,* i.e. looking at factors that facilitate or inhibit the translation from learning to developmental outcomes. Pathways through these transformative contexts are never of the linear kind implied in bold statements about the effects of primary education. Many of the benefits of primary education can only be realised if school leavers can make links between what they have learned and what they can do, or if they can go on to acquire the further knowledge, skills, attitudes, and relationships needed to earn a living and to live well as good citizens.

Trade-offs and debates on policies and priorities

All of this is easy to appreciate in theory but less easy to address adequately in a global context where the UPE target is driving post-basic education to the margins the policy agenda. Gender inequality in post-primary education is addressed through the 'gender' MDG. But the equally devastating class-based, ethnic, and regional inequalities in access to good quality post-primary education receive far less attention. Over-focused and target-driven support for UPE and gender equity in secondary schools may be counterproductive. It is doubtful whether any gains in UPE or in gender equality can be sustained without more holistic approaches to education, based on clear thinking about synergies, trade-offs, and sequencing among the various components in national systems for learning.

Box: Tanzania's lethal trade-off between UPE and real educational opportunities

Tanzania has a longer history of skewed educational provision than most countries, and so has potentially valuable lessons. Though one of the poorest countries in the world, it was close to achieving UPE by 1980 (98% primary gross enrolment). The policy rationale was to provide basic education for rural livelihoods, leaving only a tiny minority to receive the post-primary education needed for entry into the modern economy. Quality and livelihood-relevance were poor, and by 2002 the net enrolment ratio was 47%. The secondary school enrolment rate has for a long time been one of the lowest in the world, and hardly any poor children proceed beyond primary school.

The long-term nature of these problems indicates that this is not just a transitional problem caused by over-rapid expansion. After nearly 40 years of 'pro-poor' primary school provision there remain dire problems of over-crowding, under-staffing, and high rates of staff absenteeism. Better quantity and quality will be needed at secondary and tertiary levels to train up a workforce that could run a primary school system, and to generate the economic growth to sustain it.

There is little Tanzanian evidence to support the normal optimism about linear paths from education to developmental benefits. Primary schooling has translated into a relatively high literacy rate (77%) and may have contributed to poverty *alleviation* (reducing the severity of poverty despite the high overall poverty rate). It hasn't helped significant numbers of people to escape from poverty, and has probably resulted in higher overall poverty rates than would have obtained under a more balanced and economically integrated educational regime. While some aspects of the external environment have improved (e.g. better small business prospects for secondary school leavers), for poor people there is little noticeable translation from education to reduced fertility, improved agricultural productivity, or higher incomes.

Tanzania exemplifies the danger of achieving tokenistic equity (access to places that look superficially like primary schools) at the expense of the equity that really matters (access to equal opportunity to progress right through an education system and thereby escape poverty and contribute to economic growth and social progress). In other words, *a superficially 'pro-poor' strategy can in effect be pro-poverty. Policy-makers must distinguish pro-poor from anti-poverty.*

Similarly, the story of how Uganda's rush for UPE resulted in low quality provision is widely known. In its summary of that case the World Bank's recent *Opening Doors* policy document presented this as a transitional problem soon to be resolved, and proposed the utopian argument that '"More children in school" or "better quality education" should not be a trade-off'. Clearly there must always be such a trade-off, and it will be a stark and crucial one in poorer countries. Managing it requires intelligent sequencing, while linking it with the twin challenges of ensuring that some poor children can progress into secondary education and that those who leave will have opportunities to put their knowledge and skills to use.

In Tanzania, Ghana, Kenya, and Rwanda, donors have been pushing for minimum percentages of educational investment to go to primary schooling. In all of these countries, there have been disagreements between governments and foreign donors on the respective priorities of different levels and forms of education, with governments tending to pay more attention than donors to the long-term challenges of building knowledge economies based on highly educated workforces, requiring a shift of balance in favour of post-primary education. In an era when donors are trying to promote 'country-owned' development strategies such disagreements are potentially awkward, especially in a country such as Rwanda where almost all (97%) of the development budget for education comes from foreign aid. Although it is doubtful whether any donors deny the importance of a well-balanced joined-up education system, in practice their emphasis on progress towards the MDGs means that their support has tended to be strongly skewed towards primary education.

Delivery contexts, transformative contexts, and joined-up education and poverty strategies

It is understandable that the demand for brief and simple policy sound-bites often results in naïve statements about the straight lines from education to poverty reduction. This only becomes a serious problem if those sound-bites stop planners from paying adequate attention to environmental complexities in real-world education and poverty reduction strategies. Our research suggests that such inhibition does indeed occur. There is in poorer countries a dire need for inter-agency collaborative work, and joined-up thinking that would allow enough attention to the delivery contexts that make education possible and to the transformative contexts that allow learning to translate into desired outcomes. Being 'joined-up' in this instance has three general meanings:

- Being **multi-sectoral**, i.e. basing educational planning on collaboration with relevant agencies working on health, employment, agriculture, etc.;
- Being **multiform and multilevel** within the education sector, i.e. linking formal with non-formal education, and cognitive learning with vocational learning; ensuring that plans and institutions for primary education link effectively with those for post-primary education and training;
- Being **multi-actor,** i.e. strengthening collaboration between public and private sector actors to facilitate the translation of skills into meaningful outcomes.

Regarding both of these aspects of joined-up planning there is a mixed but generally worrying picture emerging from our country studies. We have seen some promising signs of schemes and agencies dedicated to linking education to formal and informal sector employment. In Ghana, the ICCES (Integrated Community Centres of Employable Skills) and STEP (Skills Training and Employment Promotion) programmes are examples of efforts to improve prospects of graduates to become self-employed entrepreneurs in the informal economy. But these largely rural programmes take place in contexts that are not yet conducive to enterprise; so the employment-generating potentials have rarely been realised. In South Africa there is widespread agreement on the need for strong educational systems at all levels and including non-formal and vocational education. In practice, however, institutions and strategies are yet to be developed which would allow integration of the education system with strategies to strengthen informal sector work. Disappointments with the performance of the National Qualifications Framework in linking education and training have led to a new initiative focused on *learnerships* which at the micro-level force such integration through contractual links between students, providers, and employers, while at the macro-level ensuring much stronger partnership between the Departments of Education and Labour.

Delivery context	Educational system	Transformative context [means]	Developmental outcomes [ends]
• Finance available for education (and long-term reliability of the sources of finance) • Trained and motivated teachers • Educational infrastructure • Demography • Attitudes and demand for education • Secure and supportive social contexts (families, communities, peace) • Health of pupils and teachers	• Pre-school • Elementary • Primary • Basic non-formal learning • Post-basic formal learning (secondary, further, higher, vocational) • Post-basic non-formal (apprenticeship, adult non-formal learning)	• Technical capabilities • Infrastructure • economic growth • employment • environmental management • social networks and institutions • cultural values and attitudes	• Development in general (biophysical and social) • Poverty eradication (lifting people out of poverty, alleviation of severity of dimensions of poverty; reducing vulnerability) • Achieving MDGs • Progress towards specific MDG indicators

Kenya and Tanzania both illustrate clearly the fact that spectacular increases in educational provision at primary level do not necessarily translate into overall developmental gains. These disappointments can largely be attributed to serious deficiencies in joined-up planning of both the multi-sectoral and multi-level kind – particularly inadequate attention to links between education and informal sector work, and inadequate attention to graduation through the education system itself, and to the threats posed to the sustainability and quality of primary schooling by deficiencies at higher educational levels. This is also a critical knowledge deficit: in both of these countries, and in Rwanda, little is known about the critical changes needed to enable children from poorer families to progress through the educational system, and little is known about the effectiveness of vocational and technical training (formal and informal) in improving prospects for decent and productive work. And Ghana's education and training system has been repeatedly reformed since the mid-19th Century explicitly to address the problems of unemployment and under-employment but with little success; since the transformative context was weak, the educational system was skewed towards basic education, and too much was expected from the education system itself.

CHIPS: a checklist of fallacies associated with UPE policy

Bearing in mind these lessons on the need for joined education systems which are integrated within broader social development strategies, we recommend the following 'CHIPS' checklist as a set of reminders about the kinds of implicit assumptions that sometimes mislead analysts and policy-makers.

Fallacies	Comments and corrections
The *Causal fallacy:* that increased primary education itself causes poverty reduction	It can only do this in conjunction with improvements in other transformative forces, particularly post-basic education and labour markets
The *Human Development fallacy:* that educational contributions to poverty reduction are best understood within the 'human development' paradigm which focuses on individuals' knowledge and skills	Most of the analysis of educational benefits falls within the individualistic 'Human Development' paradigm, for example by assessing rates of return from an individual perspective. Such analysis distracts attention from social processes which are crucial dimensions and drivers of development, such as trust, participation, security, and solidarity. All of these have strong mutually causative relations with educational systems. Even when individual outcomes are good in terms of skills and knowledge, social outcomes may be adverse (perpetuation of class and ethnic inequities; collective frustration when schooling fails to translate into employment).
The *Insular fallacy:* that primary education systems are relatively self-contained	Equitable access, quality, and sustainability of primary education are all dependent on a broader delivery context which includes post-basic education
The *Pro-poor fallacy:* that 'pro-poor' educational provisioning means focusing on primary education, and that 'pro-poor' is synonymous with 'anti-poverty'	Both parts to this fallacy are dangerous. The first part detracts attention from the need for pro-poor investments in post-basic education. The second part, more generally, mistakes direct targeting with final outcomes, and so neglects the various indirect pathways through which poverty is ultimately reduced – many of which have nothing to do with being 'pro-poor' but are to do with development in general, and with the *prevention* of poverty. Excessive emphasis on the MDG target of Universal Primary Education (UPE) is not necessarily either 'pro-poor' or 'anti-poverty' in the long run, given the crucial multi-way synergies between all levels of the education and training system.
The *Sprint-to-the finish fallacy:* that rapid progress towards UPE is necessarily a good thing	This neglects the crucial dimensions of *phasing, quality,* and *sustainability* in evaluating UPE strategies. Quick progress towards UPE can be dangerous if it is out of step with progress towards better post-basic education, if it means compromising quality for the sake of quantity (and hence providing tokenistic equity while aggravating inequities in quality), or if it increases dependence on foreign aid.

Can research make a difference?

A recurrent theme in all our country studies was the complaint by policy makers and policy analysts about inadequate evidence on which to base policies and investment decisions. This implies that there are critical knowledge deficits which are inhibiting progress – i.e. that weaknesses and imbalances in education systems are not just down to political biases and inadequate funding. No consistent pattern is discernible across all the countries, but the two common concerns are noteworthy:

- the need for more generic knowledge about pathways from education to poverty reduction at individual and macro levels
- the need for more specific knowledge about links between specific kinds of educational provision (informal vocational training, formal technical training) and specific kinds of livelihood opportunity.

The weak evidence base is often contradictory too: in Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya, and Rwanda, for example, studies have both claimed and denied that primary education causes poverty reduction. This doesn't in practice stop policy makers from citing highly dubious 'evidence' in support of policies. Government and donor policy documents frequently use unattributed and unscrutinised assertions about how much gain in income or productivity or fertility control is attributable to specific numbers of years of primary schooling. For example, a 1980 research finding (published in a World Bank Staff Working Paper by Lockheed et al) concerning the *potential* benefits to agricultural productivity of four years education *given a suitable modernising environment* has for over 20 years in numerous influential policy documents been reproduced as a naïve claim that primary education is necessarily good for agriculture. No doubt this abuse of research has boosted support for primary education but at the same time has distracted attention from the need to explore and promote synergies between primary school learning and specific developmental activities.

Given the size of the ongoing investments in education and training, there is clearly a strong case for major investments in educational research in poorer countries, provided that there is a realistic chance of producing findings that would actually be used to shape policy. In comments about the desirability of more evidence, there is a tendency to refer mainly to the importance of an issue, and to overlook the need to prioritise research according to the likelihood of uptake.

Key here is the concept of *researchable constraints* on progress in the education sector. The policy histories in our country studies, going back several decades, show little sign of any connection between policy changes and the provision of evidence. Policy impact was much more likely to be achieved by clear statements of the obvious, by and to the right people at the right time. For example policy impact of the ILO's efforts in the 1970s to promote policy recognition of the importance of 'informal sector' work, and of the implications of this for education and training, had high impact in some countries but not others, and was simply a pointer to what any casual observer could have noticed about the informal nature of most work and production in most parts of Africa. Before sophisticated analysis based on new evidence could be useful, it is vital that common sense prevails in reshaping education systems such that they provide better pathways to informal sector productivity.

New evidence is only valuable where common sense is likely to be significantly wrong, and where there is a real possibility for policy and practice to be modified in the light of new evidence. Since most people agree on the intrinsic merits of primary education and on its generally beneficial outcomes, and since most governments are actively committed to the pursuit of EFA, there is little point in further studies that would produce still more pseudo-accurate generalised statistics on 'returns' to primary education. By contrast, very useful lessons for policy and practice could be derived from in-depth qualitative analysis of pathways to poverty reduction from tracer studies that explore links between specific kinds of educational provision, educational content, and specific kinds of life outcome for specific kinds of people from specific kinds of background.

Regarding the links between PBET and primary education, common sense tells us that post-basic education systems have crucial roles to play in sustaining primary education: to make a difference, research would need to go beyond the identification of critical roles, to explore the reasons why common sense in some countries fails to ensure a sensible balance between primary and post-primary education.

Further information sources

This overview briefing note draws upon six fuller country studies on Post-Basic Education and Training, as part of a study coordinated by the Centre of African Studies at the University of Edinburgh and funded by the Department for International Development (DFID). The Policy Brief does not, of course, represent the views of DFID. The full papers are available in electronic format from www.cas.ed.ac.uk/research/projects.html. More information on the project, as well as country studies for Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa and India can also be obtained from this address.

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