

## Education In A Free Market Environment

Education is always the primary concern for a country, rich or poor. To find that this is also the case in our country should not, therefore, come as any surprise, especially when we do not have the industrial base we need to be able to support its cost. Under these conditions, the question of obtaining a suitable or even adequate employment, is frequently in doubt therefore this is the factor that consistently looms large in the people's minds.

In the increasingly competitive climate of today, any parent will know, even if it often escapes their wards, that, so as to be able to "get to the top" so to speak, children must be armed with an increasing number of diplomas, testimonials to their skills, not the least of which is one that guarantees their mastery over the English language. That aside, there are already many complaints from employers that it is virtually impossible to find a sufficient number of trained managers and technicians.

That this fact alone suggests that education as we know and experience today needs to be thoroughly reorientated, goes without saying. But in order to do this we need to be able to balance the concept of "structural adjustment programmes" of the type inflicted on us by donor agencies which has resulted in cut backs in what may be called "social spending", that is on health and education. Investment in education and human resource development is one and the only way we shall succeed in pulling ourselves up out of our persistent state of poverty, and to ensure a steady growth on the economic front is the one way to ensure a rising standard of living.

On the other hand, increasing investment in higher education may continue to be undermined by the so-called "brain drain" which takes place all the time in our country. This is not only a cost to the state to the benefit of other countries but persistently robs us of our best minds. That this is a situation aggravated by political instability and civil unrest is a fact our politicians may do well to ponder. The flight of skilled personnel, as well as any anomalies which still remain in the educational system, must be addressed on an urgent basis.

The problem is that there are seemingly two completely different and often conflicting concepts in the field of development, for the need for economic reform plus an equal need for a profound qualitative reform in education which generates a higher rate of return, represent a paradox. But most governments, including the present one, often get into trouble because they cannot choose which course to take and try to row with one foot in two boats. As this cannot be done with no cost to either, they fall back on the ploy being currently advocated by the IMF that, if only education can be made self-financing the problem will be solved, for this will not only maintain the status quo, it will reduce the burden on the state.

The best way to achieve this "happy state," or so it is believed, is simply by transferring the cost of education to parents and by cutting allocations for higher education. This is one of the reasons why private universities have been allowed to function. But, as such solutions and "IMF type recipes" are unable to rid the country of its education and labour crisis, at least not without hurting the poor, their success is often suspect. In other words, these measures are bound to hit the most vulnerable groups hardest and will only succeed in reversing the efforts of recent years to create an atmosphere wherein education, at least at the primary level, is not only open to all but compulsory.

Any proposal for introducing fees for education that cover, if not all, at least the major portion of costs, is bound to exclude the majority from any form of higher education. This in turn serve to reinforce the view that education is a preserve only for the privileged. Besides, although in theory this may mean more funds for lower levels of education, there is no built-in guarantees that this will, in fact, happen and if not, the main sufferers will still be the primary and tertiary levels. Limiting access to higher education to only the few who can afford it, as will happen if education is handed over in toto to the private sector. This will work to hamper intellectual development and, just like the brain drain, those who stand to gain will not be the nation.

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