

Primary Education And Development

A 1989 World Bank study concluded that, "Education contributes significantly to growth and that the returns on education are comparable with, or more than, returns on physical capital." It found that education plays a significant role in reducing poverty and improving income distribution and that the contribution of primary education to growth and income distribution is far more significant than for most other levels. The relevance education has to the development of local technological capacity, national growth, improving equity and reducing poverty has been so amply demonstrated in the past that we wonder why it is we are still to get our priorities straight.

Perhaps, had we concentrated more on the provision of basic education instead of opting for rapid industrialisation, by now we might have been well on the road to progress for it has been clearly established that four years of education is directly correlated with better agricultural output—by an average of 8.7 per cent according to the 31 countries surveyed and, in Nepal alone, by more than 20 per cent. What primary education can mean to people in better health and nutrition, improved child survival and lower fertility and, when taken on average, a fall in infant mortality of approximately 9 per 1000 for each additional year a mother spends in school, can best be imagined.

Even for the micro—and small-scale enterprise sector, primary education is of great importance for it means we have a worker with the ability to follow written instructions, who can measure accurately and understands some of the basics of science and organisation. Yet these are the facts that have been persistently ignored by successive governments, despite the publicity given to the benefits of education. The result of these attitudes is that there has never been an appreciable shift in official development spending. The facts speak for themselves for, although approximately 10 per cent of approximately US\$ 2.5 billion is spent for education in the South, less than one per cent goes for primary level education.

Despite these drawbacks, there has been a considerable increase in the level of enrollment in most of the Third World countries, and a corresponding increase in literacy rates, over the past three or four decades but, increasingly it is to be observed there is a weakening of resolve in many countries and enrollment rates are beginning to slip. There is the usual tendency to spend more for secondary and tertiary education—inevitably at the expense of the objective of introducing compulsory universal primary education.

Although there are other problems too, like the decline in the quality of education and the unavailability of books and supplies, there is a far greater loss in investment for children, parents and for society. The persistence of the high drop-out rates should be of serious concern for us. In 1987, for example, the percentage of children enrolled in class one who went on to complete the full primary course was only around 20 per cent. The fact that such figures compare unfavourably with countries like Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Malaysia should worry us. But do they?

It is time we took note of these trends. Any new restraint on government spending will only make matters worse. In 1989 the Director-General of UNESCO cautioned against adjustment policies that are carried out without regard to the poor and vulnerable. Cutting necessary investment in the social sectors, including education, would mean risking disruption in whatever educational progress has already been achieved, and might set back the countries of the South by a whole generation or even more.

Pragmatic measures must be taken to undo the greatest damage done at the very foundation of the educational pyramid, that is in primary education and in basic literacy for adults and out-of-school youth.

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