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EFA AND THE GLOBAL AGENDA FOR EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT: ADDRESSING CRITICAL QUESTIONS AND OMISSIONS

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Summary

This article raises some critical questions regarding the current global compact on education for development, represented by Education for All (EFA), and analyzes how its form and content are embedded in a neoliberal model of economic development. It also argues that this neoliberal embedding represents an obstacle for the achievement of the EFA goals and their sustainability.

Since the Education for All (EFA) Conference in Jomtien (1990), a global compact on education for development has been framed. International organizations and the most important donors have reached an important consensus on common policy instruments to achieve EFA by 2015. Despite the fact that this new global compact represents some important advances in the education and development field, such as major donor coordination and the recognition of the centrality of education for sustainable development, there remain critical issues that need to be addressed.

Numerous sources suggest that the current global agenda of education for development, which crystallises in EFA, represents a compromise between neoliberal economic priorities and social democratic principles - a balance between an approach to education as a basic human right and the more instrumentalist human capital approach. We suggest that a deeper analysis of the evolution of the form and content of the agenda demonstrates that it has more continuities than differences with the Washington Consensus proposal, which remains inadequate to addressing the immense social and educational challenges ahead and to promote an endogenous and sustainable process of education for development in Southern countries.

Firstly, the Dakar EFA Conference (2000) and subsequent developments (such as the institutionalization of the MDGs) reaffirm the limited focus of education for development as a primary education concern. This reifies the (neo)classical 'rates of return' rationale, which was hegemonic in the eighties, and implies leaving out of the agenda other levels of education, which are more and more important for development. For instance, strong empirical evidence demonstrates that the level of education of parents is a key factor for educational quality and performance at schools. Therefore, leaving adult education out of the agenda represents an important omission for the success of the global compact. Paradoxically, there is a parallel international education agenda, associated with the master meaning frame of knowledge economies and societies, which emphasizes the

importance of knowledge for development and takes more seriously issues such as higher education, vocational education and life-long learning. Nevertheless, it seems that this other agenda is only valid and desirable for already developed countries.

Secondly, for the neoliberal advocates of the EFA movement, placing education in the centre of the development strategy is not challenging their core policies and priorities. This is not only due to the well-known 'human capital' argument. It is also due to the fact that education is more and more framed and represented as a key social policy, the 'magic wand' to solve poverty and, very often, the best policy to achieve social equity (see this rationale, for instance, in the WB (2002) "Review of the poverty reduction strategy paper approach: Main findings"). Promoting education from this perspective allows the social to be addressed while avoiding deep policies of economic redistribution, such as a progressive fiscal reform.

Thirdly, the EFA movement agents actively promote the 'good use of the private sector' and the promotion of Public Private Partnerships to achieve EFA. The promotion of this policy is not only carried out by the now 'demonised' World Bank. In January 2008, UNESCO attended the World Economic Forum with the intention of reinforcing this proposal, which opens the door to education privatization and reifies a conception of the state in developing countries as a weak subject incapable of directly funding, owning and providing universal basic education. The EFA movement itself assumes that southern countries need the donors' and the private sector's contribution to implement this elemental function. Taxation of capital, reallocation of resources from other sectors that are not so central for development (such as military expenses), debt relief or tariffs on imports are policies that could be far more effective to get the necessary funding for education. These policy measures would contribute to the implementation of a more sustainable and less dependent education for development agenda. However, they do not resonate positively with the broader Washington Consensus agenda and, consequently, are out of the EFA scope.

This neoliberal embedding is noticeably stronger for those southern countries that participate in the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) to achieve EFA. These countries must have a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper and a 'credible' national education plan. This means that governments are required to formally integrate social development goals with plans for macroeconomic stability, liberalization and debt repayment. The FTI strongly seeks to reduce the unit costs of primary education, which could contradict other education objectives such as expanding supply, improving quality and stimulating demand. Probably, the most controversial indicative benchmark of the FTI is that related to the cap on teacher salaries, which, for obvious reasons, clearly contradicts the objective of achieving quality education for all.

Various authors state that the FTI imposes certain policies through conditionalities and frames southern countries education priorities through benchmarks and indicators. However, we would like to conclude by also adding that EFA itself has also become a source of external influence. EFA represents a set of principles, causal beliefs and common understandings over the role of education for development. EFA also answers the question of what 'education for development should be', what are the procedures and new forms of governance to achieve it, and what is the standard of behaviour of the actors that participate in this particular

movement. At the same time, it reflects, in a more explicit or implicit way, what are the topics that should be excluded from the international discussion over education and development. So, the ideational power of EFA also frames education policies in southern countries in a particular direction, and restricts the imagination of policy-makers and education activists. In this sense, 'Education For All' acts as an accommodation mechanism that serves to unify potentially competing social forces and weaken movements and ideas that challenge the neoliberal agenda. The emergence of EFA has generated a feeling that some popular social demands have been adopted by mainstream global players; nevertheless the core neoliberal policies – both economic and educational– remain unaltered.

Further resources

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