

# BANKING ON KEY REFORMS FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A critique of the World Bank Review

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**Abstract** - In the autumn of 1995 the World Bank produced an Education Review of the state of the world's educational development called 'Priorities and Strategies for Education.' In it the progress made since 1980, together with the ongoing problems are analysed and a number of key recommendations, or strategies for improvement are made. While claiming not to be a policy paper the Review is quite clearly aimed at policy makers in developing countries as well as Bank officials. It is couched in general terms, though there are specific references to developments in key regions of the World. The Mediterranean Region falls between two stools - Europe and the Middle East and North African Regions. It also suffers because there is little mention of small states and the Mediterranean has a number of these. Nevertheless, given the influence of the World Bank on helping to shape ideas and policies, this is an important paper for every region of the World. This paper, therefore, seeks to look at the rationale for the review, the main arguments and recommendations put forward and the concerns that are thrown up by these. It is probably more what is not in the review than what is that raises anxieties, but at the end of the day, because the Review is a banker's and an economist's document, those issues that concern social scientists and educationists are often the issues most frequently overlooked. Time alone will tell which approach is the right one.

## Introduction

During the past three years the World Bank has produced two major papers on education, *Higher Education: Lessons from Experience* (World Bank 1993) and *Priorities and Strategies for Education* (World Bank 1995). A third paper on adult, continuing and non-formal education is promised for later in the 1990s. Both papers are written in a typical World Bank style of generalised statements based on widescale research findings with a few specific cases illustrated in boxes to highlight the arguments and which help to give the impression that the Bank has the answer to the educational problems facing the world. This paper will question whether that is so. Although officially described as a 'World Bank Review' as opposed to a policy paper, given that the document highlights six key areas for reform for future progress and given that the World Bank now accounts for over 25% of all bilateral and multilateral assistance to education, documents such as these have key influences on educational policy makers, especially in developing countries. It is therefore worth looking critically at what is proposed to see if the Bank's suggestions of the best way forward are realistic or if key aspects have been overlooked. Others have looked at the higher

education paper critically (Buchert & King 1994). There has been a special issue of *Norrag News* (King 1995) and there will be a special issue of the *International Journal of Educational Development* (Vol.16 no.2) devoted to examining the Bank's policy. This paper therefore is very much a personal critique, drawing upon others' perceptions and highlighting key areas of concern arising from World Bank thinking. It will examine the rationale for the Review, the process of its production, its main arguments and recommendations, and the concerns that are thrown up by these recommendations.

## Rationale for the Review

*Priorities and Strategies for Education* is the first overall review of education and development since 1980 (World Bank 1980). "It synthesises the findings of the publications in the intervening years, adds a review of secondary education...and extends these results into the areas of sectional finance and management" (p.xii). It is this last point which highlights that this is very much a banker's document and perspective on educational development even though it draws heavily on UNESCO's *World Education Report* of 1993. It took almost two years to produce from the point of decision to proceed in mid-1993 to its final production in 1995.

According to Burnett (1996), its principal author and principal economist in the Human Development Group in the Bank, there were six reasons why it was felt necessary to produce a new educational paper now:

1. The Board of the Bank was concerned because there had been no substantial review of education as a whole since 1980 although there had been numerous reviews of different sectors such as *Education in Sub-Saharan Africa* (1988), *Primary Education* (1990), *Vocational and Technical Education and Training* (1991) and *Higher Education* (1994).
2. Because Bank lending to education had risen from 4% in 1985 to 10% by the mid-1990s there was a concern to see whether that money was being wisely spent.
3. In terms of total external assistance to education, World Bank spending now accounts for over 25% or about \$2 billion per annum.
4. Since the *Berg Report* (World Bank 1979) there had been a steadily increasing amount of research into the impact of education on economic growth, poverty reduction and good governance, especially in the successful economies of East Asia.
5. Given the massive changes in the global geopolitical and economic framework during recent years education is facing new challenges whether in the rich counties or the poor ones.
6. Although most OECD countries were adjusting their systems to these changes many Less Developed Countries were actually lagging further behind. As a result it was felt that there was some urgency in producing the Review. Therefore, given that there were time constraints, those responsible for producing the review decided to take a 'broad brush' approach and to concentrate on finance and management, poverty

reduction and human resource development outcomes. The target audience/readership is quite clearly educational policy makers in developing countries, many of whom will find it hard to resist the prescriptions laid down by the Bank with its financial clout and its access to such a wide range of research data.

While many would find it hard to fault much of the Bank's analysis of the ongoing problems, some concerns should be expressed about how the document has finally emerged and why the six key strategies for reform were selected as opposed to others. It is to these issues that we now turn.

## The process of producing the Review

Apart from the work undertaken by Jones (1992) we know little about the internal workings of the World Bank nor how policy is arrived at although Burnett (1996) does give some indication of the process. We know that internal discussions and consultations take place and that much is made of the research commissioned by the Bank. We know that there are consultations with other large multilateral agencies such as UNDP, UNESCO, and IIEP. We also know that a policy paper or review will go through several internal drafts and be subject to internal criticism and scrutiny to ensure that the analysis and recommendations are in accord with official Bank policy. We also know that there is a process of external consultation at different levels with governments, aid agencies and academics. Some changes to the draft document resulted from discussions held in London in December 1994 with a number of British academics and organized by the British Council.<sup>1</sup> It could be argued that this provides a kind of legitimacy for the policy document when it is published. It is certainly a softening up process and forewarns both customers, especially LDC governments, and other donor agencies about what World Bank thinking is likely to be.

Following external discussions, adjustments and modifications take place within the Bank itself so that the recommendations that emerge fit current thinking amongst senior Bank and Board officials. It is interesting to note that much background information about the place of higher education in the socio-economic development of a country was cut out of the final version of the policy paper on higher education (World Bank 1993).<sup>2</sup>

Since the early 1980s 'access to', the 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' of school systems have been terms that have been bandied about. Since the *World Conference on Education for All* (WCEFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 there has been a growing emphasis on basic education, i.e. primary education plus lower secondary school, finance, managerial efficiency, accountability and, above all, on measurable outcomes of the school system such as are currently causing so much discussion in England and Wales, as a means of checking on educational standards. In other words investment in education should have some definite economic benefits.

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## The Bank's analysis and recommendations

The basic argument of the Review is that education is essential for economic growth, especially because of changing technology and the frequency of job changes, because these call for adaptability of skills and the acquisition of new knowledge. Education can help to reduce poverty by developing a literate labour force which will in turn increase productivity. By educating women there will be a decrease in fertility and an improvement in healthcare. In spite of the enormous growth in enrolments during the past fifteen years and the growth in staying on rates into lower secondary level, except in Sub-Saharan Africa, there are still many problems of equity, access and reform in too many parts of the world.

Because of population growth the number of children not in school will rise from 129 million in 1990 to 162 million in 2015. Because of dropouts and wastage, adult illiteracy, especially amongst women, is likely to increase. There are still large numbers of poor, linguistic and ethnic minorities, women and nomadic groups who are not enrolled; quality is often poor; present systems of financing education are often inadequate for the growing expansion that is both necessary and inevitable. There is concern that many countries cannot afford to expand their expenditure on public education because of declining terms of trade or balance of payments problems. It is argued that spending on higher education in many countries is excessive - in Africa on average it is forty four times that spent per pupil at primary level (p.4) yet universal primary education has not been achieved, let alone basic education. This argument follows that put forward in *Higher Education: Learning from Experience* (1993). It is argued that funding at basic education favours the poor but that public spending as a whole, i.e. at secondary and tertiary levels, favours the affluent (p.4). Therefore public funding should be concentrated at the primary level. Efforts should be made to ensure that it is efficiently spent and private finance should be encouraged at secondary and tertiary levels. This could be in the form of privately funded institutions, private funds to supplement publicly funded institutions or through fees in both the public and private sectors. Using examples from East Asia the Review argues that this is the only realistic way forward because it allows for greater flexibility, it provides useful competition for the state sector and, besides, those who gain most from progressing through the system should be prepared to make some contribution for these benefits. Scholarships should be made available for the poor and a graduate tax should be introduced to recoup money provided in loans, even though the record on loan repayments from around the world is far from encouraging.

Because of inefficiencies in government bureaucracies and because of excessive control over the curriculum in so many countries it is argued that standards would be raised if governments would set clear and measurable targets and if wherever possible or necessary, the initial language or 'mother tongue' could be used as the language of instruction. As the Review says, "*Curricula and syllabi should be closely tied to performance standards and measures of outcome*" (p.7). It is also argued that

standards would be improved if teachers have a good grasp of their subject, if the school year can be extended, if the instructional time can be made more flexible in order to take into account differing seasons, religious festivals, household chores and the like, if there are basic necessities such as chalk, blackboards and textbooks, and if homework could be set regularly. Above all it is felt that there should be greater institutional autonomy. Headteachers, parents and school governors should be given greater power to run their own institutions because this would lead to greater accountability and because it would involve the local community in ensuring that good standards are achieved. *"School based leadership ensures an effective climate for learning"* (p.8). That some of these assertions are open to question is immaterial.

Finally it is argued that the education system should concentrate on general education, basic literacy, numeracy, language skills, science and communication skills as if these are something different from language. Vocational and technical education which the Bank pushed in so many countries for over twenty years (Watson 1993) should now be left to private providers, employers or specialised institutions. As the Review clearly points out *"Vocational and technical skills are best imparted in the workplace, following general education. The private sector should be directly involved in the provision, financing and governance of vocational schooling"*. There is no acknowledgement that in the past the Bank had got this particular policy wrong. If some of the new ideas are proved wrong in the future, will there be any acknowledgment either?

To overcome the ongoing problems facing education in many countries, therefore, the Review proposes six key strategies for reform. These are

1. Governments should give a higher priority to education and within that sector they should establish their own priorities - in conjunction, of course with the Bank.
2. There should be greater concern for learning and for labour market outcomes. In other words governments should set curricula targets and should set up effective means for measuring these.
3. Public funding should be concentrated on primary and basic education, there should be greater parental contributions for higher education.
4. There should be greater concern for equity within the education system. Not only should there be attempts to provide adequate numbers of schools but attention should be paid to ensuring that girls, rural poor, ethnic and linguistic minorities and the handicapped should have equality of access. If necessary scholarships should be made available.
5. There should be greater family involvement in school governance and parents should be allowed to exercise choice.
6. Greater emphasis should be placed on institutional autonomy and the local management of schools. This will lead to greater accountability to parents and the local community.

While agreeing with much of what the Review has analysed and proposed there are a number of quite legitimate concerns about the Review. The remainder of this paper

will address some of these.

## Areas of concern

### *The assumptions on which the Review is based*

Being international and global in their approach World Bank documents, unless they are specifically concerned with one particular country or region, tend to generalise and make assertions that are not necessarily universally applicable. They will use a few examples of particular contexts to make generalised assumptions. As Parkyn (1976) once reminded members of the British Comparative Education Society, one cannot legitimately do this. Moreover while the Review does acknowledge what every comparativist knows, namely that education systems and assumptions are culture specific, nevertheless there are some very bold assertions made in this document as if they were universals. Comment has already been made of the vocational and technical education issue yet, as Lauglo (1995) has pointed out, there are many examples of successful vocational education and there are many other examples of statements which need to be qualified.

There is an assumption that formal schooling is beneficial for all groups but is it always so for nomadic peoples or for hill tribes for whom it may destroy their ways of life? There is an assumption that formal schooling is important for literacy development but is this always so? Rogers (1992) would argue that where different literacies are used formal schooling can actually weaken a child's grasp on the most important literacy needed for daily living, that of the local community.

While the 1980 paper raised a number of questions about education's role in socio-economic development and acknowledged a genre of radical, though not always Marxist or neo-Marxist, research that argued that formal schooling was not always beneficial because it alienated many young people from their cultural and social environment, especially in rural areas; because it raised unrealistic expectations and led to rural-urban migration; because it maintained the social and political *status quo*; because it sought to legitimise social injustice because of its selective function; and because so often the curricula and syllabuses sought to ignore religious, linguistic or ethnic pluralism - the present Review does not even recognise that there is a genre of social and philosophical research literature in the field of education and development which shows that the justification for education is often far more subtle and complex than merely using labour market and economic arguments.

Moreover the place of nonformal, community education and adult education is almost entirely ignored, or at least shelved, until another policy paper or review. Yet for many millions of people this is probably the only education that they are likely to get. Even if they have gone to primary school and completed the cycle but not gone on to lower secondary level there is every possibility that they can be given considerable help in employment flexibility through nonformal provision.



The point is that the research base upon which *Priorities and Strategies* relies is predominantly post 1980 and econometric in perspective. It is largely concerned with finance, economic returns, human resource development, efficiency, effectiveness, costings, private funding and the like. It therefore reveals a rather narrow and restricted perception of the purpose of education, and schooling in particular. There is little recognition that schools are not simply black boxes that can be quantified in terms of numbers of pupils, teachers, rooms and textbooks, each of which has a price tag. Schools are living organisations, full of humanity, involved in a learning/teaching process, but also involved in social, psychological and emotional interactions between teacher and teacher, teacher and pupil, teachers and parents and the community. It is as if the richness of human interaction has been reduced to economic statistics.

The trouble is that, as Samoff (1993) has shown in the context of World Bank thinking on Africa, the research base is largely restricted to that produced by World Bank staff or commissioned by the Bank. The result is a self fulfilling prophecy. Research data supports the policy that the Bank wishes to pursue because that research has already helped to shape that policy. Of the several hundred research papers cited in *Priorities and Strategies* only a handful are from the very rich UK and Australian and Asian research base. Contrary views are therefore not considered or recognised. Indeed so influential is the Bank over other donor agencies that when the British Overseas Development Agency produced its *Aid to Education* in the 1990s (ODA 1995) almost all the references were from the World Bank. The excuse was that this was what would impress ministers! Ironically the protests over this issue from British academics led the ODA to publish a series of research documents that it commissioned from British scholars (e.g. Lewin 1993).

Inevitably therefore particular assumptions are made about formal education being largely concerned with providing skilled labour for the employment market. Efficiency and effectiveness of formal schooling are therefore measured in terms of how many of those who enter the system complete it; how many dropout; what the costs are to the society and the community, and how many find gainful employment in the labour market.

### *Weakness of rates of return analysis*

One problem is that the Bank is obsessed with Rates of Return analysis of Education systems (ROREs). It has used incomparable data from different parts of the world, some of which were collected as long as fifteen to twenty years ago and which as Bennell (1995,1996) has shown in several recent papers, especially with regard to Africa, are not only inconclusive but they are also highly questionable.

This is a very serious allegation because Bank thinking about which levels of education should receive the most public funding is based on RORE analysis. Three of the six key recommendations of the Review - higher priorities for education; greater public investment in primary education and greater private finance for higher

education; and greater attention to educational outcomes - are all based on ROREs.

Being a bank it is perhaps inevitable that it sees investment in education in terms of returns. After all in 1994 it disbursed \$2 billion which accounted for 25% of all bilateral and multilateral assistance to education.

Investment in education is notoriously long term and problematic. It is therefore important to identify those areas that are likely to have a socioeconomic impact. This also accounts for the emphasis on 'labour market outcomes'. RORE, according to Bennell (1996), is used over thirty times in the Review to justify the assertions on policy directives such as this statement: *"economic analysis of education - in particular, rate of return analysis - is a diagnostic tool with which to start the process of setting priorities and considering alternative ways of achieving objectives within a sectoral approach."* At its best, however, RORE is a very imprecise means of economic measurement.

The assumption is based on the work of Psacharopoulos (1994) that ROREs to education, especially primary education, are universally 'very high' but Bennell (op.cit.) argues (a) that there are enormous national variables; (b) that much of the data used by Psacharopoulos is now very dated; and (c) that in any case it is very difficult to acquire accurate data from many advanced countries let alone most LDCs. Hence the research methodology of much of the Bank's approach is highly questionable.

That said there are some fundamental weaknesses with RORE as a mechanism for policy making anyway. Firstly it relies on data from the past to predict likely future earnings, but given the enormous variations in the labour market because of new technologies future earnings have become almost impossible to predict. Moreover, as with all economic theories, it assumes that individuals will behave in a predictable and rational manner. One cannot assume that. Besides in many developing countries only a few people enter the modern wage employment sector. It is very difficult therefore to measure in any meaningful way what income is being earned. This is particularly true in the urban slums and the rural areas.

Because many more people in nearly every country now have more education than say in the early 1980s it is very difficult to argue that ROREs to primary education are necessarily far higher than to other levels. Nevertheless this argument is used (p.65) to justify reducing levels of public funding to higher education. Bennell (1995,1996) challenges this argument, suggesting that the evidence provides contrary findings and would suggest that the highest ROREs in at least 18 countries actually come from upper secondary level. In fact Bennell suggests that the Review misuses RORE data, even if of dubious value; to justify its policy of support for primary education and lower secondary education and its withdrawal of support for vocational education which has been apparent for some years.

Perhaps the biggest indictment of ROREs comes from Heyneman (1995), himself a World Bank staff worker. He says that

*the bulk of the economics research has been superfluous to making educational decisions. It has overemphasised rates of return to expansion by level, and under-emphasised the economics of educational quality, new*

*subjects, target groups, teaching methods, and system reforms. It has virtually ignored the dependency of one part of the education system on other parts, for example the essential contribution made by secondary and higher education to the quality of basic education. When dealing with vocational education the economics literature has followed a traditional misspecification now three decades old (pp. 559-560).*

He believes that economists of education, including those in the World Bank, have too often asked the wrong questions; have failed to recognise that each level of education is interdependent with the others and it is therefore very difficult to isolate one sector from any other. Moreover, although the evidence that higher education advantages students from middle and upper middle income brackets, there is no evidence to justify why governments should not subsidise higher education heavily unless the real reason is that they need to invest money into other sectors and can only do this by depriving another sector. He feels that the economic arguments regarding education overlook what most educators know, namely that outcomes depend as much on student motivation as they do on variables such as textbooks and other teaching resources.

To be fair the Review does recognise some of the weaknesses of ROREs. "*They can be misleading, when, for instance, labour markets are heavily regulated and earnings do not reflect marginal productivity*" (p.22). However it then goes on to use ROREs to argue the case for investment in primary education as opposed to other sectors!

### *Quality and curriculum content*

Although the Review stresses the need for improving the quality of education one could be forgiven if what is meant by quality improvement is really greater financial efficiency over the use of public funds rather than the quality of what is learnt. By stressing the economic aspects of formal education as the provision of labour for the workplace the Review is in danger of overlooking some of the goals of the education system which educationists and politicians are often concerned with: good citizens, well balanced members of society and so on.

The Bank believes that the curriculum should emphasise basic literacy, numeracy, science and 'communication skills', whatever these may be! In *Improving the Quality of Primary Education* (1990) the stress was on 'higher order thinking'. If by the latter is meant the ability to think for themselves, to know where to find information, to think logically then there are no problems. Unfortunately one does not sense that much thinking has gone into the content of the curriculum in many developing country primary schools. If, as is widely acknowledged (Ilon 1993; Kennedy 1993; Reich 1991; Watson 1995) the impact of the globalisation of the economy and changes in technology are having, and will continue to have, a profound impact on employment patterns, are schools adequately preparing pupils for the changed

scenario of limited or changing employment, or even for no employment, especially in rural areas because even here there will be rising unemployment because of mechanisation of agriculture?

At present the working conditions in too many schools, especially in developing countries, are inadequate or non-existent. Classrooms are overcrowded, roofs leak. Textbooks and other basic resources are inadequate or not available. Increasing class sizes might be a more efficient use of economic resources but it leads to difficulties both for the teacher and the pupils with the result that teaching is didactic and learning is passive rather than interactive.

Moreover if societies are changing economically and technologically they are also changing politically. The disintegration of the former USSR, parts of Eastern Europe and many states in Africa, and the beginnings of multi-party democracy, require active preparation for citizenship and political understanding if the worst excesses of dictatorship are not to re-emerge and if people are to feel that they have a stake in society. Pupils need to be able to develop skills which they can use for self-employment in case no other work is available. Above all they need to be encouraged to think reflectively on a wide range of issues, not least moral and ethical ones, especially given that most societies are multilingual/religious and ethnic; and that if social cohesion is important then it must begin in the schools. Economic and social changes and market forces as a key determinant of educational provision are likely to exacerbate social tensions rather than diminish them. It is not without significance that the East Asian societies, so warmly endorsed by the Bank as models to follow, have all placed moral education as a central part of the curriculum. Seemingly this important aspect of the curriculum has not been considered by the authors of the Review yet it is probably more important in the late twentieth century than ever before. Perhaps it is that the education issues that are perceived by educationists and social scientists to be important are going to be very different from those analysed by bankers and economists (Lauglo 1995), yet there seems to be no reason why the different perspectives cannot be reconciled.

To improve the quality of provision, to make the best use of the curriculum and textbooks and to ensure that pupils are regarded as something infinitely more valuable than future labour market fodder, requires sensitivity from teachers and improved teacher preparation, whether through preservice training or through INSET. One is reminded of the views expressed in a Commonwealth conference on teacher education held some years ago when it was pointed out that *"for the teacher to assume an effective role in the broad context of educational development he (sic) must have professional self-confidence and responsibility based on a solid competence established through an enlightened and forward looking programme of teacher education"* (Commonwealth Secretariat 1974:29). Surprisingly the importance of the teacher in the education process is largely ignored. Perhaps this is because the Review fails to draw upon any of the research undertaken on teacher education and teacher effectiveness. Indeed the assumption is that they should teach towards specific curriculum objectives, measured and assessed. Unfortunately this can act as a major constraint on creative teaching.

## *Skills training and vocational education*

Another omission is that while the Review talks about certain basic educational skills, such as those outlined above, it largely ignores vocational and technical education, arguing that formal education and hence investment in it have a profound impact on socio-economic development. It is surprising that, given that the Bank was spending \$600 million per annum on technical education and diversified schooling in the early 1980s so little is made of it in this paper. It could be argued that it gets so little mention because the Bank had already produced a policy paper in 1991, but to dismiss vocational education in the following manner is incredible: "*Vocational and technical skills are best imparted in the workplace, following general education. The private sector should be directly involved in the provision, financing, and governance of vocational schooling*" (p.80). It is the arrogance and boldness of this assertion and the manner with which the issue is dismissed and the hostility shown to VOCED that are so striking. Given the influence that the Bank had on so many countries to expand their vocational schooling during the 1970s and 1980s thereby distorting their educational budgets and economies, at least some kind of apology might have been in order (Watson 1993).

The real reasons for being so dismissive would appear to be the following:

1. The work of Psacharopoulos (1987), indicated that investment in VOCED at secondary school level was very expensive and the social ROREs to investment at this level were lower than at general secondary level. Bennell (1995) has challenged these figures in his general critique of ROREs.
2. Lauglo (1995) has gone even further by suggesting that by emphasising the cost of VOCED, based on Psacharopoulos' work, the Bank has been unduly dismissive of much good work being undertaken in different societies in the field of vocational and technical education. Although the Review pays lip-service to the unique needs, requirements and problems of different states, as well as to the diversity of socio-economic realities, these are largely overlooked in bland generalised statements.
3. Because VOCED has generally proved to be expensive it is far easier for the Bank to suggest that private employers should take on this role themselves: it excuses the Bank from becoming too heavily involved in that costly area again. Besides it is more difficult to measure the outcomes of vocational schools than it is with a more prescribed school curriculum which can be measured through assessment and test scores. Schools can also be more accurately checked and held to account.

Many of the alternatives advocated - on the job training and privatised provision - have a very mixed track record, and while LDCs - and the Bank - have suffered adversely from ill-thought out and expensive programmes, several OECD countries are now seeking to combine a broad vocational training with general education. The development of NVQs in England and Wales is a good example. The Review does acknowledge this up to a point: "*Countries cannot quickly reduce the size of such*

*large vocational secondary programmes, but the programmes should increasingly be made more general and linked to the development of attitudes and general skills, rather than specific skills, necessary for work."* One is left with a feeling of inconsistency and ambiguity in the Bank's position.

### *Equity*

Recognition is rightly given to the need for greater emphasis to be placed on equity in educational provision to ensure that girls, ethnic and linguistic minorities and those in rural areas get opportunities for schooling. There is even consideration given to those with physical and other disabilities, for whom provision globally is very uneven. However while recognition is made that market forces and parental choice alone are insufficient mechanisms to make provision possible and available and that governments have a crucial role to play, there is little recognition made of the particular problems facing multilingual and multiethnic states. The same could be said about small states such as Cyprus or Malta or Fiji, Lesotho or Swaziland. While it is laudably recognised that there should be bilingual provision wherever possible, the cost implications are largely ignored. Many countries which are multilingual and/or multiethnic are also very poor. The dilemmas facing policy makers are too easily overlooked by donor agencies, educational planners and economists in the policy recommendations (Watson 1994). The social and ethnic tensions that arise if government is weakened or if political and global economic changes undermine particular states can be seen in situations as diverse as Russia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Burundi, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. As for refugees thrown up as a result of these conflicts the Review has this to say: *"Particularly troublesome is the growing number of refugee children in Africa; many of them have no government to take the responsibility for providing them with schooling"* (p.119). Particularly troublesome! There are over 25 million individuals who are refugees throughout the world. Surely this has now become such a global problem that it no longer only concerns a few countries but has become an issue of social, political and economic concern that the Bank should begin to turn its attention to in order to see how best it can help?

### *Finance and the involvement of the private sector*

For some years it has been widely recognised that the ability of many governments to finance their education systems is severely limited and few would quibble with the Review's analysis of cash shortages. Increasing demand, escalating costs, reduced income, especially in many of the poorest countries, constrained by IMF and World Bank policies on structural adjustment and low, or inefficient tax bases, have meant that many governments worldwide are looking for alternative sources of funding for their education systems (Bray & Lillis 1988; Watson 1991). The argument of the Bank

put forward with vigour in recent years, has been to press for the private sector to become more openly involved, either in collaboration with the public sector, by privatising certain key aspects of the system such as maintenance or textbook provision, by encouraging private institutions at secondary and especially at tertiary levels, or by charging fees at both these levels. These views were most clearly articulated in the review of higher education (World Bank 1993). They have been questioned in a series of papers challenging Bank policy (Buchert & King 1994).

The success of private institutions in East and Southeast Asia and Latin America, and the longstanding use of loans and/or graduate taxes in several industrialised countries clearly appeal to the Bank (pp.107-8). However even the Review recognises that loans have been notoriously difficult to recoup because of administrative inefficiency and while Sweden has a 30% loss rate Kenya has a staggering 103% loss rate (p.108). If there is such unreliability how can the Review so strongly advocate this approach? By encouraging fee paying as a contribution at least for secondary and tertiary levels the Bank is actually favouring the better off. Regardless of the rhetoric about targetting the poor, means testing and providing scholarships for certain groups in the name of equity and poverty alleviation, this approach is only feasible in rich countries, small states or those states which have efficient administrative infrastructures. In many of the poorest countries, especially in SSA but also in large countries like Brazil, Egypt and India, such are the inadequate lines of communication and responsibility that the likelihood of recouping loans or of providing free education to those most in need becomes both insuperable and also open to corruption. Besides how do officials means test rural farmers whose income is largely derived from subsistence production, which in turn is affected by the vagaries of the weather?

To be fair many industrialised countries have been cutting back on defence expenditure, expensive bureaucracies and state owned industries, but the evidence from poorer countries is that these are political decisions that governments are reluctant to take. Making the chief beneficiaries of education pay for it is decidedly unpopular and in many cases politically impossible because of the power of the middle classes. Even to move down this route necessitates a change in thinking on the part of governments, bureaucrats and populace alike. It needs courage to face up to the public backlash. But above all it needs a substantial private sector in the first place. It is difficult to transfer the successful policies of East Asia and Latin America to much of Africa and many parts of the Indian sub-continent where the concepts of markets, supply and demand, as opposed to state planning, die hard.

Two other strategies or key reforms advocated are those of 'household involvement' in school governance and the decentralisation of administrative planning, finance and control to the institutional level, what has increasingly been defined as decentralisation, though as many observers have pointed out decentralisation takes many different forms (Lauglo 1995; Lauglo & Maclean 1985; McGinn 1996).

There are three main strands to the Bank's arguments: (1) that parents and communities should be more closely involved in school governance; (2) that parental choice should be expanded; and (3) that although risks are involved in this strategy they can be eased by judicious government intervention, through public subsidies for poorer families and through public information about schools' quality and performance.

There is little quibble about the principle of parental and community participation in school governance but it needs to be pointed out that in spite of legislation in the UK (1980, 1986 (No.2) and 1988 Education Acts) to encourage and make provision for parental representation on governing bodies it has not been easy to find parents willing to stand, let alone vote, especially in working class areas of the cities. The picture in middle class areas has been different but nevertheless mixed. How much more likely is there to be a similar situation in poor urban and rural areas of so many LDCs where the concept of elections in a non political sense is uncommon and where the machinery for undertaking such elections is not readily available? However, where parents are involved in the running of schools as in PNG, New Zealand, the USA and Canada they are likely to take a greater interest in what is happening in schools and are often willing to be involved in fund raising. There are now many examples of parental/community partnerships. After all education should be a partnership between professionals and parents (e.g. HMSO 1977) but there is no guarantee that educational quality and standards will be raised as a result. Participation provides for both *rights* and *responsibilities*.

The issue of *choice*, however, is fundamentally different. It is based on a premise of individual rights. It is associated with the belief of the New Right that parental choice will lead to schools becoming marketable commodities and that because of competition academic standards will rise (e.g. Carl 1994; Chubb & Moe 1990). The evidence for this is inconclusive, certainly from research in the UK. Parents choose schools for a variety of reasons. Academic excellence and quality are only two of them (see Bowe et al. 1994; West 1992; Woods 1992). At least the Bank paper acknowledges this (p.124) but nevertheless the authors cite the OECD (1994) as justification for choice and competition - "*The dynamic of competing for pupils typically enhances some school characteristics associated with effectiveness, such as strong leadership and sense of mission.*"

The Bank recognises that three factors are important for choice to be effective (p.122):

- more than one school should be available;
- each institution should have distinguishing features;
- each institution should have a considerable degree of autonomy.

However one senses that the argument is ill thought through for a number of reasons.



1. It is based on affluent Western concepts, rooted in urban settings, which wish to see the State's role in education diminish. As Carl (1994:297) points out, however, far from reducing state intervention, choice in the USA and England/Wales has actually increased it, albeit in different guises.
2. It is a smokescreen for extending private education, especially at higher education level, and *Priorities and Strategies* (pp.122-3) merely picks up the arguments put forward in the policy paper on higher education (World Bank 1994). In fact choice only truly works where finance is directly involved, either because of the private sector or because funding follows pupils in the public sector as is the case in England/Wales and where physical space can accommodate expansion.
3. In practice, therefore, parental choice benefits the well to do affluent, articulate or professional classes. As a result it leads to differentiated education with good schools for certain groups and poor schools for others. As Ilon (1994) has argued this is a problem that is being accentuated by globalisation and structural adjustment. Should the Bank be advocating this or should it be emphasising ways of providing EFA?
4. Parental choice makes it very difficult for administrators or school principals to plan their numbers accurately more than one year ahead. If a school's popularity falls and parents remove their children, that can also have negative implications.
5. Choice rarely applies in rural areas unless there are nearby viable private alternatives. In many of the poorer areas of Africa and the Indian sub-Continent parents are lucky if there is any school available, let alone having a choice. Even in large urban areas - and the growth predictions of some of these are horrendous - the logistics of getting children to school B rather than A are simply unrealistic unless the family is affluent, there is very expensive school bus provision or children spend a very long time in getting to and from school.
6. Parents do not necessarily make choices about schools on rational grounds, even given league tables of examination results and other data. *Bowe et al.* (1994) have highlighted the problems of parents' evenings and the mass of data provided by schools seeking to market themselves which require even erudite parents to show remarkable analytical and political skills. Moreover, marketing schools through brochures, advertisements and so on is not a cheap option and is aimed at literate parents. As a result, for many of the poorer groups in society, choice is simply not an option.

The notion of parental choice, the thinking behind it and the realistic implications for most families have been exercising a number of academics and researchers in the USA and the UK in recent years. Their findings are almost unanimous. Choice is a political smokescreen, devised by governments to benefit certain social groups. The greater the autonomy of institutions, which is an essential ingredient of the choice syndrome, the more likely is it to lead to the break up of any coherent national system of education. Is this what the Bank is advocating or does it recognise the limitations of the concept?

That said, many people do believe that they have a right to choose the best school for their children. This is particularly true in countries where there is a plurality of

religious belief or linguistic or ethnic groups. In such situations, especially where religious freedom is regarded as important such as the USA, UK, Netherlands, Austria and Belgium the freedom to choose particular schools with a particular religious ethos should not be denied. Many would say it should be encouraged. But such freedoms can be costly and many LDCs lack the financial flexibility to make such varied provision. In those situations private schools have a crucial role to play.

While the World Bank may be proposing an ideal the realities on the ground in many countries negate the ideal and the 'risks' are considerable. The advocacy of choice and competition as a panacea for raising educational standards needs to be treated with caution. Far better that governments and other public authorities addressed seriously their responsibility to increase investment and to eliminate waste.

### *Local autonomy*

In line with Bank thinking over the past few years the Review advocates greater decentralisation and decision making to school level. It recognises that this is not the same as local financial management and the ability to raise taxes locally nor is it delegated responsibility from central government, but it is argued that headteachers should be allowed greater autonomy over the use of staff, timetabling, the language of instruction, classroom practices and the use of funding from the authorities. The authors of the Review believe that it would lead to greater accountability and flexibility. However the validity of these claims has been challenged by several researchers (e.g. Lauglo 1995 and McGinn 1996). Local managerial control might lead to greater local corruption and interference. Without additional training for headteachers, about which there is no mention, although the Commonwealth Secretariat has been sponsoring training for African headteachers for the past few years, it is difficult to see how effectiveness and efficiency will be increased. Moreover if the real reasons for school failures are because of administrative failures at the centre it is hard to see how these proposals will lead to greater improvements except perhaps in a few cases.

### **The Bank's influence over other agencies**

Perhaps one final concern is related to the World Bank's influence over governments and other aid agencies. The Bank's views are only one perspective on education but their ability to shape the educational agenda is considerable and it is quite clear from the Review that the Bank has sufficient confidence in its diagnosis of the issues and of its power over individual governments that it can make the following statements:

*"Bank programmes will encourage governments to give a higher priority to education and educational reform, particularly as economic reform takes hold as a permanent process...", "Bank supported projects will pay greater*

*attention to equity...will focus more intently on institutional development"....  
"Basic education will continue to receive the highest priority"(p.15).*

Towards the end of the Review it is stated that the Bank will "*adopt an even more explicit sector wide policy focus in order to support changes in educational finance and management*" (p.153). In other words it will more than ever use financial leverage to exert influence over individual governments regardless of statements to the effect that it wants to work in 'partnership' with local governments and that it will cooperate in 'developing a policy framework'.

The Bank is more assertive than ever before. It has a clear agenda. It is prepared to exert political and economic conditionalities as a prerequisite for new loans. We have already seen other donor agencies falling into line with the Bank over lending for primary education. The British government's *Aid to Education in the 1990s* (ODA 1995) provides a good example of this. Will other agencies cooperate and fall into line or will there be tensions because of differing philosophies and conflicts of interest? That remains to be seen.

If by the turn of the century educational administration has been strengthened in many countries, the infrastructure has been improved, and quality has been raised thanks to World Bank support in individual countries, there will be general satisfaction. If, however, the problems that remain are still acute and the social problems are on the increase, then the educationists might begin to demand a greater voice in policy making in order to restore a more humane understanding of the debate. At the moment, however, they are largely on the sidelines. It is the economists who are still in the ascendancy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The author was one of those present at these discussions which were amicable and fruitful. As a result of points raised changes were made to the final version of the Review.

<sup>2</sup> This emerged at a meeting held at Edinburgh University in May 1993 in which one of the main authors of the *Higher Education Policy Paper* was a major contributor.

<sup>3</sup> This section of the paper appeared in a similar form under the heading 'Choice in Education - What Choice? A comment on the World Bank's proposals for Household Involvement in Education'. *NORRAG News* 18, edited by Kenneth King, November 1995, pp.52-55.

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