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EDUCATION AND TRAINING OUT OF POVERTY? A STATUS REPORT

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Editor

Kenneth King

Editorial Address

Kenneth King, Centre of African Studies, 21 George Square, University of Edinburgh,
Edinburgh EH8 9LD, Scotland UK
Telephone (44) 0131 650 3878; Fax: (44) 0131 650 6535
Emails: Kenneth.King@ed.ac.uk or P.King@ed.ac.uk

Co-ordination Address

Michel Carton, Institut Universitaire d'Etudes du Développement (IUED),
Post Box 136, Rue Rothschild 24, 1211 Geneva 21, Switzerland.
Telephone: (41) 22 906 5900/1; Fax: (41) 22 906 5994
Email: Michel.Carton@iued.unige.ch

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EDUCATING AND TRAINING OUT OF POVERTY?
A STATUS REPORT

There has been a widespread interest in the international community in the potential for education and training initiatives to assist in breaking the cycle of poverty. This aspiration lies behind the Millennium Development Goals, as well as the Education for All agenda. Education is often included, for similar reasons, in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. Of course, a great deal depends on what kind of access the poor get to education and training systems, and what quality they find there, and what they can do in the labour market as a result. The poor don't need a great deal of research to tell them about the value of 5 years of poor quality education, nor about the labour market potential of an under-funded community skills training centre, with absentee instructors. But what of the successes? Has education played a role in Asia - and especially China - in moving so many millions out of poverty? Where has skills development succeeded in moving young people from poverty? What other political or economic conditions need to be in place for education and training to be effective?

LIST OF CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

Kenneth King

Phil Coombs: an agent for change (Obituary)

John Hall, formerly IIEP, Paris

Educating & Training out of Poverty – a review of the issues

Kenneth King, Hong Kong and Edinburgh

SUCCESS STORIES BUT POLICY AND RESEARCH CHALLENGES

Education for All: China and India

Kai-ming Cheng, Hong Kong

Challenges at the interface between education and poverty in contemporary Africa

Tim Unwin, London

What role for education in the Chronic Poverty initiatives?

Caroline Dyer, Leeds and Pauline Rose, Sussex

How have the poor fared in India's "tiger economy"?

Santosh Mehrotra, Bangkok

Quality education as the key for poor families and communities?

Leon Tikly, Bristol

A new research consortium for research on educational access,
transitions and equity

Keith Lewin, Sussex

Research Consortium on Educational Outcomes and Poverty (RECOUP)

Christopher Colclough, Cambridge

Skills, poverty reduction, growth and equity: the lessons

Kenneth King and Robert Palmer, Edinburgh

Reflecting on the drivers of change in Hong Kong and China, 1967-1996

Ruth Hayhoe, Toronto

Post-primary education and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)
David Levesque, London

What can Africa learn from China in human resource development?
He Wenping, Beijing

Education, rural development and poverty reduction in East and South East Asia?
David Atchoarena, Paris

Universalising nine-year compulsory education for poverty reduction in rural China
Zhang Tiedao, Zhao Minxia, Zhao Xueqin, Zhang Xi, Wang Yan, Beijing

LITERACY AND BASIC EDUCATION FOR POVERTY REDUCTION?

The National Centre for Research into Basic Education
Jophus Anamuah-Mensah, Winneba, Ghana

Are the MDGs enough? Donor perspectives and recipient visions of education and poverty reduction in Rwanda
Rachel Hayman, Edinburgh

Literacy education as a tool for development: views from northern Ghana
By Adams Bodomo, Hong Kong

Literacy for All? Chipping away at the ceiling
Sonali Nag-Arulmani, The Promise Foundation, India

Parental or policy-maker misunderstandings? Contextual dilemmas of pre-schooling for poverty reduction in Malawi
Foster Kholowa, Zomba, Malawi and Pauline Rose, Sussex

Quality Schooling – Enriching the Village Commons
Padmanabha Rao A. Rama, River-Rishi Valley Education Centre, India

ICTs in primary education: towards a new strategy for poverty reduction in Africa
Dalia Ghebreyal, New York

The tale of two Ghanas revisited: outcomes to education for the rich and the poor
Leslie Casely-Hayford, Accra

National pre-schooling for poverty reduction in Tanzania
Lyabwene Mtahabwa, Dar es Salaam and Hong Kong

POLITICS AND PRACTICE OF POST-BASIC EDUCATION FOR POVERTY REDUCTION

Building a better life for all? The role of post-basic education and training in South Africa
Salim Akoojee, Pretoria and Simon McGrath, Nottingham

Preparing students for work in Ghana: Is vocationalisation of secondary education working?
Kwame Akyeampong, Sussex

Economic reforms and financing higher education in India: the question of access and equity
Geetha Rani Prakasam, New Delhi

The politics of post-basic education for poverty reduction and growth in Kenya

Kenneth King, Hong Kong and Edinburgh

Post-elementary education, poverty and development in India
Jandhyala Tilak, New Delhi

The MDGs as a perspective to review capacity building programmes
Gerrit Holtland, The Hague

BASIC SKILLS FOR POVERTY REDUCTION?

Education and training for sustainable livelihoods: the informal sector in coastal communities,
South Africa
Carolyn Petersen, Edinburgh

Schooling and basic skills: implications for training programmes in poverty areas
Enrique Pieck, Mexico City

Making education services work for rural populations
Modupe Adelabu, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Vocational training programmes and disadvantaged youth in Latin America
Claudia Jacinto, Buenos Aires

Becoming skilled: education for livelihood or livelihood for education? A case study from West
Africa
John Pryor and Mariko Shiohata, Sussex

Skills for work? From skills development to decent livelihoods in Ghana's rural informal economy
Robert Palmer, Edinburgh

NATIONAL AND LOCAL EDUCATION REFORMS FOR POVERTY REDUCTION

Progress towards EFA: Lessons from Mexico's educational reforms
Christopher Martin, Mexico City

Educational decentralisation in Sri Lanka: Policy practice for poverty reduction?
Sachiko Kataoka, Sussex

Education and poverty reduction in Tanzania
Ruth Wedgwood, Edinburgh

Educational Finance in China's West
Rong Wang, Beijing

Basic, post-basic, or sector-wide: making the whole greater than the sum of its parts
Harvey Smith, Reading and Claver Yisa, Kigali

Is education a road out of poverty for migrants?
Pravina King, Hong Kong and Edinburgh

The IIEP of Cooperation with SACMEQ
Kenneth Ross, Paris

NORRAG DEVELOPMENTS

NORRAG NEWS –the new implementation challenge
Gerrit Holtland, Kenneth King and Robert Palmer

How to initiate a research-policy debate at national level
Gerrit Holtland, The Hague

Disseminating at the national level – Ghana
Robert Palmer, Edinburgh

Disseminating at the national level – UK
Kenneth King, Hong Kong and Edinburgh

Disseminating at the national level – China
Emily Mang and Jiang Kai, Hong Kong

Disseminating at the regional level – Eastern Europe and Central Asia
Maria Golubeva, Riga

NORRAG membership by country at the end of May 2006
Gerrit Holtland, The Hague

The launch of the book, 'Knowledge Society- a Confidence Trick?'
Jean-Baptiste Meyer and Michel Carton, Geneva

For your Diary? Meetings from May 06 to Jan 07
Pravina King, Hong Kong and Edinburgh

NN 37

by: Leon Tikly, University of
Bristol

QUALITY EDUCATION AS THE KEY FOR POOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES?

Can improving the quality of education experienced by learners from poor families and communities assist in the fight against poverty and gender inequality? This is a central question facing our recently established, DfID-funded research programme consortium on Implementing Education Quality in Low Income Countries (EdQual). The consortium led by the University of Bristol, includes the Universities of Bath (UK), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Witwatersrand (South Africa), Cape Coast (Ghana) and the Kigali Institute of Education (Rwanda). We are also working closely with associate partners in Pakistan (Aga Khan University) and in Chile (Universidad de la Frontera). The aim of the RPC is to generate new knowledge to assist governments in low income countries, DfID and the international development community to implement initiatives that will improve the quality of education in ways that will benefit the poorest people in the world and will promote gender equity. The consortium will also aim to create a sustainable resource through supporting African partner institutions to become regional centres of excellence in one or more areas of education quality and through strengthening capacity at government level and within organisations to successfully implement change.

On the one hand the evidence as outlined, for example in the recent Global Monitoring Report is unequivocal (UNESCO, 2005). There is a consensus that providing education of a good quality that is considered relevant by learners and their families has a positive impact on enrolments and can lead to pupils staying in school longer with a reduction in drop out and repetition rates.

Increased levels of literacy

and education are also linked to greater control by women over their fertility and to a reduction in risk taking behaviour associated with the spread of HIV/AIDS. Further, improvements to education quality lead to higher cognitive achievement which in turn is linked to higher individual productivity and economic growth. This is increasingly important in the global era because poverty reduction relies on the ability of education systems to produce the range of skills required for successful global integration and this in turn depends on improving the quality of basic and post-basic education. The processes of learning associated with a good quality education can also assist in achieving wider social goals including social cohesion and conflict resolution, understanding of citizenship and human rights including equal rights for women and girls and respect for cultural diversity.

Scratch below the surface, however, and the issues become more complex. As Sayed (1997) has pointed out, 'the concept 'quality' is elusive and ... frequently used but never defined'. It has multiple meanings that reflect 'different ideological, social and political values'. Understanding must also take

account of a changing context in Africa and other low income countries and of a range of regional and international initiatives. For these reasons, developing a conceptual understanding of education quality and its contribution to poverty reduction is a key objective and will, necessarily, be an ongoing iterative process incorporating the views of different stakeholders and grounded in our empirical research in a range of very different contexts. We have, however, by necessity had to determine our own starting points. Our own initial review of the literature (Barrett et al, 2006) has identified two broad approaches to education quality. One links quality to achieving higher learning outcomes within a more efficient use of resources whilst the other emphasises a more capability and rights based approach. We assume that both are important and this is reflected in our research design. For instance the project being led by Bristol provides a secondary analysis of the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) data set to develop models of school effectiveness and quality indicators relevant for Africa. This will feed into and inform, however, the four African based projects which very much focus on developing the capabilities of practitioners in areas of concern identified by them through participatory action research techniques. Mixing methods and creating synergies between different approaches seems exciting to us. We also start from a view that education quality issues mediate issues of access and outcomes and we therefore seek to work closely with colleagues in the sister RPCs devoted to these topics to develop common understandings. We believe that an appreciation of

education quality means paying attention to learner characteristics including socio-economic and cultural background, gender, ethnicity, urban or rural location. It must also take account of enabling inputs and a range of outputs relating to cognitive and affective goals including achievement in core subject areas, awareness of risks associated with HIV/AIDS and attitudes to work and community.

Our view of the importance and the contextualized nature of education quality has been reinforced by the views of the policy makers and stakeholders who have participated in our national consultative workshops that we have held in each partner country during our recently concluded inception phase. Communicating effectively with different stakeholders is critical not only to determine research priorities but also to assist with identifying the mechanisms that will enable new initiatives to be mainstreamed. The outcomes of the workshops and literature reviews have fed into our ongoing research design. In particular, the quality of teaching and learning has emerged as a key research priority as has the need to address the development needs of large numbers of under qualified teachers. Three of the five large scale projects will, therefore, focus on aspects of teaching and learning, innovations in the maths and science curriculum, the use of ICTs and language and literacy. These projects will all include research into professional development to support improvement. Other issues that were raised are the need to improve the quality of management and leadership at the local and school level at a time of decentralisation including the management of staff (reducing absenteeism and

motivation), the mobilization of resources and the procurement of materials and these management issues are also addressed in a large scale project. Smaller scale projects will focus on specific quality issues in early childhood and higher education, the use of distance learning, the built environment and meeting the needs of learners with special education needs, refugees, orphans and other vulnerable children. Given the scope of the quality issues covered by our RPC the need to identify key priorities and a very tight research focus within each project has become paramount as has the need to develop our own capacity and capabilities as researchers. Chief amongst these has been the ability to effectively communicate across national and continental boundaries. Whilst remaining fully aware of the enormous challenges ahead, we are buoyed by our conviction as researchers of the absolute importance of education quality for tackling disadvantage.

EdQual Website <http://www.edqual.org/>

Email leon.tikly@bristol.ac.uk

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