

Education systems that lack a strong, clear respect for human rights cannot be said to be of high quality

Some attributes of a high-quality learning process have achieved independent status as part of the definition of education quality. Most centrally, these can be summarized as the need for education systems to be equitable, inclusive and relevant to local circumstances. Where the access to or the process of education is characterized by gender inequality, or by discrimination against particular groups on ethnic or cultural grounds, the rights of individuals and groups are ignored. Thus, education systems that lack a strong, clear respect for human rights cannot be said to be of high quality. By the same token, any shift towards equity is an improvement in quality.

The status of other aspects of the education process is more contested. Despite the near universal agreement as to what cognitive skills comprise, they are not entirely culturally neutral. Moreover, there remains great debate about how they can best be taught and learned. For example, while most if not all experts judge rote learning to be indicative of poor-quality education, there is debate between those in favour of structured instruction and advocates of more child-centred approaches. In principle, such questions can be settled empirically – by investigating, for example, which methods of class organization and teaching behaviour work best in different contexts. Yet, the evidence is often more ambiguous than we would wish. The question is even more complex in adult learning.

Overall, however, judgements about the quality of education depend upon how it performs intrinsically, as a process, and upon its effectiveness in forming desired cognitive and non-cognitive skills. This final chapter brings together the major arguments and evidence on these questions presented in this Report and asks what implications they have for the prospects of improving the quality of education, particularly in lower-income countries. First, however, the state of progress towards each of the EFA goals is briefly assessed.

Progress towards the EFA goals

The Education for All Development Index (EDI) provides a summary quantitative measure of the extent to which different countries are meeting

four of the six EFA goals: universal primary education (UPE), gender parity, literacy and quality.¹ It shows that massive educational deprivation continues to be concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa, some of the Arab States and South and West Asia. Significant efforts are still required to reach the goals in Latin America and the Caribbean, East Asia and the Pacific and Central Asia; meanwhile, most countries of North America and Western Europe and of Central and Eastern Europe have already reached the goals or are close. Progress between 1998 and 2001 was widespread but not universal: about three-quarters of the seventy-four countries with available data for both years registered an increase in their index value. Moreover, for the seventy-four countries as a group, the average gain in the EDI over the period was modest, at just over 2%. On the other hand, some low-income countries that are still far from achieving EFA saw strong gains of 15% or more, with improvements in each of the measured goals in some cases. This demonstrates that rapid progress towards EFA can be made – even in the poorest countries – given commitment and appropriate policies.

Goal 1 – ECCE. Progress since 1998 in the provision of early childhood care and education has been slow and took place mainly in countries with already significant levels of enrolment. Average stay in ECCE programmes ranges from 0.3 years in sub-Saharan Africa to 2.2 years in North America and Western Europe. It is less than a year in most developing countries outside Latin America and the Caribbean.

Goal 2 – UPE. The expansion of schooling is translating into a slow reduction of the number of out-of-school children in the primary-school age group, from 106.7 million in 1998 to 103.5 million in 2001. This is insufficient to achieve UPE by 2015. Indeed, out of the 100-plus countries that had data for both gross enrolment ratio (GER) and net enrolment ratio (NER) and had NERs below 95%, over forty combined GERs below 100% with NERs below 90%, which points to a need to increase the capacity of their school systems. Half a dozen sub-Saharan African countries still have NERs below 50%. There has been some convergence, however, with NERs generally increasing in cases where they had been below 70% in 1990. Meanwhile, the completion of primary schooling remains a major

1. Where not otherwise specified, figures refer to 2001.

cause for concern: delayed enrolment is widespread, survival rates to grade 5 are low (below 75% in thirty of the ninety-one countries with the relevant data) and grade repetition is frequent (in 2001 more than 10% of students were repeating a grade in a third of the eighty-one countries with data).

Goal 3 – Life Skills. Skills development is a crucial link between education and economy. While it is difficult to monitor globally, country experience shows that investments and participation in this area are low if not marginal and that provision is highly diverse.

Goal 4 – Literacy. Nearly 800 million adults – 18% of the world’s adult population – were illiterate as of 2002. Some 70% of adult illiterates lived in just nine countries, led by India (33%), China (11%), Bangladesh (7%) and Pakistan (6%). Realization of EFA goal 4 crucially depends on policies implemented in those four countries. Both India and China registered significant progress over the 1990s.

Goal 5 – Gender. Enrolment and performance disparities detrimental to girls and women are still pervasive. Almost two-thirds of the world’s adult illiterates (64%) are women. The gender parity index for primary schooling is 0.63 in South and West Asia, 0.69 in the Arab States and 0.77 in sub-Saharan Africa. The situation is slowly improving, although progress over the 1990s was very uneven: by 2001, 57% of out-of-school children of primary school age were girls (more than 60% in the Arab States and South and West Asia), as against 60% in 1998 and seventy-one of the 175 countries with data available still had a GPI in primary GER below 0.97. Girls enrolled in primary schools have higher survival rates than boys but are less present in secondary education. The disparities between the sexes are more extreme in secondary and in higher education. Of eighty-three developing countries with available data, half had achieved parity in primary GER by 2001, less than one-fifth had achieved it at secondary level and only four had in tertiary education.

Goal 6 – Quality. Progress towards better quality in education is assessed (Chapter 3) by examining trends in the resources available to schools, in the availability of teachers and in learning achievements as measured by tests of

cognitive skills. As regards the first two,² one important conclusion is that, over the long term, quantity and quality in education are complements rather than substitutes: the countries that are farthest from achieving quantitative goals 1 to 5 are also farthest from achieving qualitative goal 6. Nevertheless, low-enrolment countries may experience dynamic trade-offs between expanding coverage and improving quality, or between various elements of quality.

Public expenditure on education represents a higher proportion of GDP in rich countries that have achieved EFA goals (the regional median for North America and Western Europe is 5.2%) than in poorer countries that need to expand already under-resourced school systems of insufficient coverage (the equivalent proportion is 4.1% in India and the regional medians are 3.3% in sub-Saharan Africa and 3.9% in East Asia and the Pacific). Changes between 1998 and 2001 showed no particular trend: government expenditure either dramatically increased or decreased in several developing countries.

Correspondingly, pupil/teacher ratios (PTRs) are low where enrolment is high (North America and Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia have PTRs of less than 20:1) and high where enrolment is low, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia. PTRs in those regions are typically above 35:1, and in several African countries above 55:1. The regional median for sub-Saharan Africa increased from 40:1 to 44:1 between 1990 and 2001, while that for South and West Asia was stable at around 40:1. Some countries, especially in southern Africa, face the additional challenge of the AIDS pandemic. For example, over 800 primary-school teachers died of AIDS in Zambia in 2000, equivalent to half the total number of new teachers trained that year.

The quality of teachers, which is crucial, remains insufficient in many developing countries. The qualifications required to become a government primary-school teacher vary quite widely – for example, from twelve to seventeen years of education in twenty-six sub-Saharan African countries – and they are often not met. Furthermore, the distribution of teachers is very unequal within countries, since disadvantaged areas typically receive those with less training.

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² The third is returned to in a later section.

Formal qualifications, however, matter less than the skills and behaviour of teachers; there is evidence that insufficient mastery of curricula and absenteeism are widespread in many parts of the world.

What is an education of good quality worth?

There is good evidence that the benefits of education to individuals and society are enhanced when its quality is high. For example, better learning outcomes – as represented by pupils' achievement test scores – are closely related to higher earnings in the labour market; thus, differences in quality are likely to indicate differences in individual worker productivity. Furthermore, the wage impact of education quality appears to be stronger for workers in developing countries than for those in more industrialized societies. Empirical research has also demonstrated that good schooling improves national economic potential – the quality of the labour force, again as measured by test scores, appears to be an important determinant of economic growth, and thus of the ability of governments to alleviate poverty.

Benefits do not arise only from the cognitive development that education brings. It is clear that honesty, reliability, determination, leadership ability and willingness to work within the hierarchies of modern life are all characteristics that society rewards. These skills are, in part, formed and nourished by schools. Similarly, evidence shows that bright but undisciplined male school drop-outs who lack persistence and reliability earn less than others with the same levels of ability and cognitive achievement, and will continue to do so beyond school. Schools that encourage the above characteristics more successfully than others will bring greater long-term earnings benefits to the individuals who attend them. Schools also try to encourage creativity, originality and intolerance of injustice – non-cognitive skills that can help people challenge and transform society's hierarchies rather than accept them. These, too, are important results of good schooling, having broader benefits for society, irrespective of their impact on personal earnings.

Good quality in education also affects other aspects of individual behaviour in ways that bring strong social benefits. It is well known, for example, that the acquisition of literacy and numeracy, especially by women, has an impact upon fertility behaviour. More recently it has become clear that the cognitive skills required to make informed choices about HIV/AIDS risk and behaviour are strongly related to levels of education and literacy. For example, HIV/AIDS incidence in Uganda has fallen substantially in recent years for those with some primary or secondary education, whereas infection rates have remained unchanged for those with no schooling. It seems that the higher levels of cognitive achievement fostered by better schools enhance the skills required to process and respond to information about HIV/AIDS from a wide variety of sources.

Higher cognitive achievement is also strongly correlated with the likelihood of staying in school longer. Thus, higher-quality schools and school systems tend to have lower rates of dropout and repetition than others. The potential benefit is not insignificant: for schools that are dysfunctional and have high rates of grade repetition, some improvements in school quality may be largely self-financing because they reduce the average time completers spend in school.

In all these ways, the quality of education influences the speed with which societies become richer and the extent to which individuals can improve their own personal efficacy, productivity and incomes, as well as the ways in which society can become more equitable and less vulnerable to disease and ill health. Accordingly, the quality of education makes a significant difference to the prospects of achieving a wide range of individual and development goals.

Quantity alone is not enough

From a policy perspective, one fundamental reason why focusing simply upon the quantitative UPE goals will not deliver EFA is that in many parts of the world an enormous gap exists between the numbers graduating from schools and those among them who have managed to master a minimum set of cognitive skills. In these circumstances, given the demonstrable

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link between cognitive achievement and many of the benefits of basic education, schooling does not benefit a large proportion of those who attend.

National and international assessments show that performance levels are very weak in low- and middle-income countries. In seven southern African countries included in the SACMEQ study (1995–98), between 1% and 37% of tested grade-6 students reached the ‘desirable’ level in reading and between 22% and 65% reached the ‘minimum’ level. Six of these countries repeated the survey in 2000/2001 and three of them found that achievement levels had fallen significantly. In six countries of French-speaking Africa covered in the PASEC study (1996–2001), 14% to 43% of grade-5 pupils had ‘low’ achievement in either French or mathematics. In seven low- and middle-income countries included in PIRLS (2001), between 44% and 84% of grade-4 pupils scored in the bottom quartile of the International Reading Literacy Scale, compared with between 2% and 23% in eleven high-income countries. Finally, the PISA study (2000–02), covering thirty-five high- and middle-income countries, showed that 18% of 15-year-olds scored at or below ‘level 1’ in reading literacy, which indicates very limited reading skills. Regional and socio-

economic disparities are pervasive within the countries concerned.

Table 6.1 illustrates the scale of this problem for a group of African countries and one country in Latin America. It shows that, while NERs in many of them are high, only a small proportion of school leavers have achieved minimum mastery levels as defined by their own national governments. Thus, for example, in Malawi, where about 90% of children attended primary school in the mid-1990s, only about 30% stayed in school to grade 5, and as few as 7% achieved the minimum acceptable reading standards in grade 6. The fact that the NER in Malawi at the time was close to 70% seems rather irrelevant to whether the average child was benefiting in a minimally acceptable way from attending primary school. Although Malawi is something of an extreme case, on average for the countries shown, fewer than one-third of children achieved minimum mastery levels in grades 4 to 6, although the average NER for the countries was 65%. A policy aimed exclusively at pushing net enrolment towards 100 in these countries could, at least in the short term, ignore the learning needs of those who attend, and thereby entail the loss, for a substantial majority of children, of

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Table 6.1: Quantitative versus qualitative indicators of participation in primary schooling

Study	Country	Cohort	% ever enrolled (ages 6–14) ¹	% that survived to grade 5 ²	% that achieved minimum mastery ³	NER in primary for the period before the test ⁴
SACMEQ (1995) Grade 6 reading test	Malawi	100	91	31 (34)	7 (22)	69
	Mauritius	100	99	98 (99)	52 (53)	99
	Namibia	100	97	74 (76)	19 (26)	84
	U. R. Tanzania	100	87	70 (81)	18 (26)	54
PIRLS (2001) Grade 4 reading test	Colombia	100	98	60 (61)	27 (45)	87
	Morocco	100	99	77 (78)	59 (77)	81
PASEC (mid-1990s) Grade 5 French test	Burkina Faso	100	35	25 (72)	21 (83)	28
	Cameroon	100	88	45 (51)	33 (73)	73
	Côte d'Ivoire	100	65	45 (70)	38 (84)	49
	Guinea	100	48	32 (66)	21 (65)	36
	Madagascar	100	78	31 (40)	20 (64)	63
	Senegal	100	48	42 (87)	25 (59)	51
	Togo	100	82	49 (60)	40 (81)	66

Notes and sources:

1. Data are for the year closest to the test year in each country. World Bank, 2004.

2. The percentage of the cohort that survived to grade 5 is calculated by multiplying survival rates to grade 5 (in brackets) by the percentage of children ever enrolled. Survival rates are taken from the EFA Assessment 2000 CD-ROM for SACMEQ I and PASEC, for the year of the test or the closest to it, and the Statistical annex, Table 7, for PIRLS.

3. The percentage that achieved mastery is calculated by multiplying the percentage of children in the study who achieved the minimum standards (in brackets) by the percentage of children who survived to grade 5. The criteria for considering a student to have achieved minimum standards is different in each study, so the results are not comparable (see Box 3.8). For SACMEQ I countries, data are from Kulpoo (1998), Machingaidze, Pfulani and Shumba (1998), Milner et al. (2001), Nassor and Mohammed (1998), Nkamba and Kanyika (1998), Nzomo, Kariuki and Guantai (2001) and Voigts (1998). For PASEC and PIRLS countries, data are from Bernard (2003) and Mullis et al. (2003), respectively.

4. The averages were calculated for each country using the years available. For SACMEQ I and PASEC countries, data are from the EFA Assessment 2000 CD-ROM; for PIRLS countries, data are from the Statistical annex, Table 5.

some of the most important benefits of school attendance.

The main determinants of better quality in education

Identifying the best ways of improving learning outcomes is not easy, and it has been tackled in many different ways. The learning process is very complicated, but at its centre is the relationship between learners and teachers. Learning is smoother where there is close correspondence between the values and objectives of both of these groups. However, the relationship is strongly conditioned by the resources available to schools, by their curriculum objectives and by the teaching practices followed. The evidence reviewed in this Report provides general guidance on these matters, which is confirmed by results from several different research approaches.

No general theory as to what determines the quality of education has been validated by empirical research. Many approaches in the economic tradition have assumed that there is a workable analogy between schools and factories, in the sense that a set of inputs to schooling is transformed by teachers and pupils into a set of outputs in a fairly uniform way. However, attempts to assess the extent to which changing the mix of inputs affects the outputs, so as to identify the most cost-effective policy levers for quality improvement, have often proved inconclusive.

The results for the more developed economies, where data are more generally available, suggest that increasing resources for schools sometimes helps, but that often it apparently does not. In many OECD countries, test scores have not significantly increased for decades, despite large increases in real per-pupil spending. This is partly because those societies have become richer over time, and the expenditure increases partly reflect the consequent increase in real earnings in the education sector. It is likely that the earnings of education workers, relative to those of other professions (the ratio has declined in many cases), are more intrinsically related to changes in productivity in the sector. The law of diminishing returns probably plays a role as well, once certain levels of resourcing (and, perhaps,

of average cognitive achievement) have been reached.

In the case of developing countries, the results appear to be more positive: a majority of studies in which significant relationships are found suggest that cognitive achievement, as measured by standardized tests, increases as school expenditure, teacher education and school facilities are enhanced. As one would expect, in low-income environments where resources are scarce, additional inputs appear to have an effect. There are few uncontested results even here, however, and the technical problems involved in interpreting them are considerable.

Other evidence from a growing body of experimental studies does demonstrate much stronger links between school resources and performance, however. Increasingly such studies are being conducted in low-income countries. They show that levels of cognitive achievement are significantly improved by provision of textbooks and other pedagogic materials (Kenya, the Philippines), by reductions in class size (India, Israel, South Africa) and by provision of child-friendly remedial education by locally recruited parateachers (India). These studies are methodologically superior to those in the 'production function' tradition discussed above. They offer grounds for believing that resources are extremely important to the quality of schooling, particularly in resource-poor circumstances.

Schools are definitely not factories producing outputs according to recipe in a technically deterministic way. Crucial to their effectiveness is the education process itself, in which teachers and pupils use the available inputs and interact with each other in creative ways. A strong research tradition, recognizing this fact, has studied the education process, particularly in schools, with a view to identifying, and learning from, success.

Such 'school effectiveness' research shows that successful primary schools are typically characterized by strong leadership, an orderly school and classroom environment and teachers who focus on the basics of the curriculum, hold high expectations of their students' potential and performance and provide them with frequent assessment and feedback. In richer countries,

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these studies explain a relatively small proportion of the variation in cognitive achievement. For developing countries, however, the results are stronger; they emphasize that structured instruction, face-to-face instructional time, the adequacy of textbooks and other materials, and teacher quality are factors that help account for higher student performance.

As regards teachers themselves, the evidence shows that how they spend their time has a major effect on learning outcomes. Monitoring how well students are progressing requires time and energy in the classroom, beyond the time spent teaching. Ability grouping by whole classes is ineffective, particularly for less able children, but grouping for the specific skill being taught works well for all children, particularly in reading and mathematics. Teachers' subject mastery and verbal skills, their expectations of students and their own passion for learning are significant factors for school quality.

Other evidence from 'instructional effectiveness' research confirms these results. It suggests that structured teaching methods, bringing a strongly ordered approach to learning tasks – with clear learning goals, sequenced introduction to new material, clear explanations, regular checking of understanding, time for pupils to practise new skills, completion of learning tasks and frequent testing and feedback – are helpful ingredients in strategies for quality improvement and reform.

These factors add up to an ambitious programme for reform, particularly in low-income countries where class sizes are large and teachers often have scarcely more formal education than their pupils. Nevertheless, some countries have put all, or most, into effect, with a significant impact on the quality of learning in their schools. Studies of country experience suggest that common to these successes was the central importance assigned to the quality of the teaching profession – its training, support, recruitment standards and pay – relative to other professional groups. These countries' experience also suggests that successful qualitative reforms require a strong leading role by the government. Each case showed a continuity of policy over several decades, remaining stable even when regimes changed. Thus, a robust long-term vision for education, with quality as a persistent theme, appears to be a vital ingredient. The ways of

building such commitment are context-specific; they cannot be universalized in any helpful way. Nevertheless, study of best-practice approaches at a more micro level leads to many insights. These are addressed in the next section, which aims to describe key opportunities to improve education quality in ways relevant to the world's poorest nations.

Policies for improved learning

Judging by their broad statements of education policy, most governments recognize the importance of improving the quality of education. Most are also under pressure from students, parents, employers and educators not only to expand educational opportunities, but also to make educational institutions and programmes work better. However, governments of low-income countries, and others working within severe resource constraints, face difficult choices. Where enrolments are low, responding to expansionary pressures with a 'more of the same' model may further constrain resource availability. Moreover, the human, material and financial costs of treating quality improvement in an integrated and comprehensive manner – as advocated in this Report – may prove burdensome. Shortage of funds, the limited capacity of systems and institutions to manage change effectively, the myriad constraints on teacher effectiveness and the absence of a strong political alliance supporting quality in education can constitute major barriers to change. As this Report demonstrates, however, much can be achieved by making better use of existing resources and focusing on targeted interventions that respond to specific weaknesses.

This is not an argument, however, for neglecting the broader vision of education of good quality. Specific policies can be articulated within a medium-term framework that highlights the rights of all learners to a basic education of good quality. Schools are at the heart of the institutional map of education, and a vision of what makes a good school is important, even if achieving the ideal for all takes time.

One approach is to define a minimum package of essentials – an entitlement that every learner and every school has the right to expect. The

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Better organization and management of existing resources can yield great gains

evidence of this Report suggests that such a package should include a commitment to provide a stated minimum of instructional time for each pupil or student, a safe and healthy place in which to learn, individual access to learning materials, and teachers who have mastered content and pedagogy. Each of these requirements has resource implications, but better organization and management of existing resources can yield great gains. Placing specific values on these benchmarks might involve minimum instructional time of 850-1,000 hours per year; basic safety and health standards for each school, associated with the provision of particular school facilities; agreed time frames for improving standards of textbook provision and revised standards of competency for teachers.

An emphasis on minimum standards, however, can restrict more innovative activities emerging from a given context. Taking this risk into account, the following seven action points suggest priorities for policy that are not necessarily beyond the reach of the most resource-constrained countries that are farthest from EFA.

First, in many countries, present styles and methods of teaching are not serving children well. Pedagogy needs to respond to cultural and classroom contexts. Structured approaches to teaching, as defined above, are not at odds with a child-friendly learning environment. Where such approaches are introduced, reforms to teacher training and school management will usually be required. Pedagogically sound language policy – allowing children to learn in their mother tongue for at least their first few school years – is particularly important.

Second, investment in teachers is critical. It is clear that teachers' subject knowledge is a key factor in their effectiveness. Paying more attention to recruitment practice, by emphasizing talents and motivation as criteria alongside formal educational attainment, also pays dividends. Traditional, institutional pre-service training is less effective than school-based pre- and in-service training. Teachers' pay and conditions of service are a fundamental determinant of their status in society and of their incentives to join and remain in the profession. Teacher absenteeism, a major problem in many countries, usually indicates that these are too

low. In some cases the problem can be lessened through better central support for the management and supervision of schools and more timely payment of salaries. In others, closer management of the allocation of teachers among schools and districts can allow increases in average PTRs at little cost to quality. Double-shift arrangements and the use of locally recruited, highly motivated parateachers can provide a boost to quality at relatively low cost in some circumstances.

Third, the quality and availability of learning materials strongly affect what teachers can do. National book policies can usefully provide a framework for the growth and development of local publishers and enable schools to choose which books they use. Gains can be made by managing students' use of books in schools better and helping teachers use books well in support of learning.

Fourth, those who work in and with schools need help to find their own solutions to improving quality. Schools can be given greater freedom provided that accountability frameworks are well defined. Head teachers and principals are critically important to this endeavour. The nature of their leadership can influence the quality of schools strongly. Community leaders and others providing support to schools at local and district levels can also help to give leadership and direction. Decentralization can provide greater scope for schools to attract additional resources, both financial and in-kind, though in low-income contexts especially this can involve a heavy risk of regressive patterns in school quality, where poorer communities have poorer schools. Generally, accountability at the school level needs to be mirrored by greater central accountability. Governments should increasingly publish information on expenditure and resource levels in education, disaggregated to district level and made available locally. Examples are indicators of pupil/teacher ratios, textbook provision and expenditure per student. Such information provides an important means of strengthening the political voice of the poor and improving their potential access to educational resources.

Fifth, relationships among different parts and aspects of the education sector, which the compartmentalized machinery of government

may obscure or ignore, can be exploited to help improve quality. ECCE helps with subsequent achievement in school and further lifelong learning. Literacy improves adults' commitment to their children's education, in addition to being desirable in its own right. Gender-sensitive policies in education and more broadly based gender reforms in society directly improve the quality of education and its outcomes. While few governments invest heavily in these areas, a policy environment that enables changes to occur in these areas can strongly support the quality of education at an affordable cost.

Sixth, the existence of special needs in education often needs to be more strongly acknowledged. Uniform models of reform, which ignore the multiple disadvantages many people face, will fail. Useful educational approaches for those who live with HIV/AIDS, emergency, disability and child labour are emerging, and need to be given more support.

Finally, knowledge can make a major difference to the quality of education. Many initiatives require research and/or knowledge that is specific to context and local circumstances. It can often be generated by those who work in the locality or region. Investment in services, networks and structures designed to develop and share educational knowledge can yield significant returns, by enabling schools to make much better use of limited resources.

Although policy reform is not without cost in any of the above areas, much can be achieved in each, given a strong commitment to improve education quality in these ways. It is clear from the evidence in this Report that many countries are not yet able to obtain the human development and economic benefits ascribed to better learning outcomes. In these countries and elsewhere, the scope for improving the quality of learning is enormous. Creating consensus around quality is both a first step and a primary political requirement. It is in that sequence and context that the resource requirements in each society can best be addressed.

International dimensions

Recent estimates of the additional resources likely to be forthcoming in the follow-up to

Monterrey, together with those that may arise from the proposed International Finance Facility and through the US Millennium Challenge Account, suggest that total aid to basic education might be expected roughly to double by 2006, to between about US\$3 billion and US\$3.5 billion. Though the increase is substantial, this remains well short of the roughly US\$7 billion per year in external aid to basic education that is likely to be required through to 2015³ if the EFA goals for universal participation in primary education of a reasonable quality are to be achieved, let alone the other EFA goals. The likely shortage of resources places a particular premium on ensuring that aid is used as effectively as possible and that it is directed towards the countries that most need it.

How, then, can aid better support quality in education? All agencies providing aid for education clearly want to achieve a mix of quantitative and qualitative goals. No one is unconcerned with quality. Nevertheless, the objective of improving education quality is often not well served by aid. This situation has two main dimensions. First, excessive fragmentation of aid programmes, from the point of view of recipients, often involves such high transaction costs that the benefits of the potential transfer of resources can be undermined. Donors often have political reasons for maintaining relationships with large numbers of recipients, many of whom may receive relatively small amounts of aid, but it is unlikely that such justification helps improve the quality of the assistance provided – to education or other sectors. Substantially reducing the average number of countries receiving bilateral aid⁴ to education, from the present level of over sixty per donor, would strengthen the quality of aid support. Addressing this issue would require collective attention to which countries are being supported by which donors and to what extent. It would also increase the pressure on agencies to work together to coordinate their aid programming. The potential benefits in terms of efficiency of aid use are clear, however. Some such rationalization of patterns of support needs to be incorporated in the medium-term objectives of the aid community.

The other important dimension of the current situation involves external models of good practice in education, advocated without any

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3. Existing flows to basic education total some US\$1.5 billion per year, and an estimated US\$ 5.6 billion of additional resources is needed annually over the period to 2015 to achieve universal participation in primary education, gender parity and enhanced quality, making US\$7 billion in all. See Chapter 5 and UNESCO (2003a).

4. That is, aid from twenty-one of the member countries of the OECD Development Assistance Committee.

Although external assistance can help, it cannot make up for the absence of a societal project for improving education

particular consistency by different groups of agencies, and often found to be insufficiently attuned to local circumstances. There is evidence, however, that the increasing use of sector-wide approaches is helping increase consistency and reduce underperformance of aid. Such approaches also seem to help strengthen national ownership of aid-supported educational programmes and thus improve the sense of partnership between aid agencies and recipient governments. On the other hand, the shift away from project approaches has increased the amount of policy dialogue required and the number of conditions attached to aid. These circumstances can challenge local ownership of the process, enhance the need for donor coordination and slow the pace of implementation, particularly where government financial management is weak. For all these reasons, the impact of aid on education quality has not yet been markedly positive.

Clear benefits can be gained from the further development of sector approaches. Some agencies traditionally paid special attention to a specific input, such as teacher upgrading or textbook provision. This approach often overlooked the complementary measures needed for education quality to be enhanced. In principle, aid support that is provided in a context of comprehensive sector analysis and reform is likely to be better placed to bring positive consequences for education quality. The introduction of new aid modalities, such as budget support and the possibility of financing part of the cost of teachers' salaries, provides new opportunities to support quality.

It remains the case, however, that although external assistance can help in achieving appropriate resource levels and managing school systems, it cannot make up for the absence of a societal project for improving education. That must come from within each society and cannot be engineered by outsiders. Ultimately, then, the most important lever is the domestic political process. If it favours educational change, the chances that external assistance will facilitate a move towards higher-quality universal education are profoundly better than is the case where such political circumstances are absent. ■