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RETHINKING EDUCATIONAL AID¹

FROM PROJECT TO PROGRAMME

TO SECTOR-WIDE SUPPORT:

SOME QUESTIONS

AND CONCERNS

*Lene Buchert*²

This Open File includes papers which were originally discussed at the international conference on 'Education innovation in the South: modalities for international support revisited', which was organized by the Netherlands Organisation for Co-operation in Higher Education (NUFFIC) and held in Leiden, Netherlands, from 2 to 4 September 1999. The papers focus on the rhetoric, reality and potential outcomes of recent changes in international support to education, particularly with respect to what has become known as education sector investment programmes, programme support, sector support or the sector-wide approach to education development in the South. These different terms are used variously by international agencies, national governments, and also by the authors in this Open File. Their common characteristic is that they are understood as an alternative and/or a mode supplementary to the project assistance mode which was dominant during the 1970s and 1980s. The terms reflect an understanding that the project mode has failed to ensure holistic, integrated development of education systems and that the new support mode can better remove bottlenecks through co-ordinated efforts horizontally and vertically in terms of support for all the individual components which are needed to provide quality education at any specific level.

The origin of this new support mode can be associated with initiation of World Bank education sector investment programmes and their underlying principles as expressed by Harrold et al. (1995). These principles are the following: (i) each programme has to be sector-wide in scope; (ii) it has to have a coherent sector policy framework; (iii) local stakeholders have to be in the driver's seat; (iv) all donors must sign up to the programme; (v) common implementation arrangements must be developed; and (vi) minimal long-term financial and technical assistance must be ensured. These principles have now penetrated the thinking of the majority of other financial and technical assistance agencies and are portrayed in the papers in this Open File on EC–India collaboration (Jagannathan and Karikorpi) and on the Swedish International Development Agency (Lind and McNab). This is noteworthy because national governments in the South have always been concerned about the development of the education sector in its entirety. This was so before and during the time when international assistance to education was provided through the project mode. Therefore, while the current criticism that the project mode has led to fragmentation of effort and inefficient use of international aid is voiced by both international agencies and national governments, the fact that it is voiced after extensive project assistance may well have been a factor contributing to the weakening of the national institutional structures and capacities that are preconditions for implementation of the large-scale education sector programmes which are now being advocated.

What is the new modality?

There seems to be a widespread belief that the new modality represents *the* or *the only* solution for overcoming the deficiencies of the previous project assistance mode (King & Buchert, 1999). This is despite the fact that it is generally admitted by advocates of the new modality, as demonstrated also in the papers by Jagannathan and Karikorpi and by Lind and McNab, that no country where all the desired underlying principles have been successfully implemented in a sector programme can yet be identified. Furthermore, many of the principles associated with the approach still have to be worked out by the key parties, for example common implementation procedures, common funding arrangements, coherence among funding and technical assistance agencies in their support for a government programme, inclusion of all stakeholders—particularly civil society organizations and the private sector—in the process, and reliance on local rather than international expertise. Therefore, the new support mode is rather to be understood as an evolving process whose end result we do not yet know and whose initiation

demands extensive capacity building by all actors involved in order to ensure coherence of understanding and implementation.

McGinn in his paper questions whether a number of the key terms associated with the new modality, for example partnership, sector support agreements, donor co-ordination and donor coherence, are new concepts and whether they are necessarily in the interest of the national governments. In addition, he outlines possible alternative and more wide-ranging strategies which might better ensure that international aid makes a difference to the teaching and learning in the classroom.

A number of other critical issues related to the new support mode also remain unresolved, for example the risk that the approach represents another standardization or blueprint which fails to take specific national contexts, conditions and timing into consideration. As shown in the paper by Sedere, the introduction of the sector-wide approach in Bangladesh had negative consequences for the development of the primary education sub-sector. Furthermore, it is still unclear how currently well-functioning projects are to survive and become properly integrated into a sector-wide programme, an issue raised in the paper on Guatemala by Asturias and others. Finally, despite the emphasis on inclusion of all actors, the initiation of the sector-wide education programmes tends to reinforce high-level government-agency technical negotiation and expertise at the expense of civil society participation, a critical issue of relevance also to the situation in Guatemala.

Therefore, while referring to an already existing new modality or a new, clearly defined alternative approach to development of the education sector in countries in the South is questionable, it could be safely argued that the current effort to find an alternative support mode has resulted in new emphases on the content of a number of development co-operation dimensions. In particular, the anticipated new support mode is expected to reinforce the following: that governments and agencies work according to objectives, goals and targets stipulated in a government policy programme which is based on a clear vision for development; that there has to be policy dialogue in order to agree on the specific objectives, goals and targets; that there has to be co-ordination of the agencies by the government; that there has to be ownership of the development process and its outcomes by the government; that there has to be accountability to the stakeholders and transparency throughout the process; that the government has to lead and the agencies have to follow on terms agreed upon in negotiation between two equal parties; and that there has to be partnership between government and agencies and, preferably, other civil society institutions, including the private sector. The paper by IsHak and

El Gammal highlights the potential scope for innovation in the application of all these dimensions in relation to the Social Development Fund in Egypt.

A new modality—in whose interest and on whose initiative?

Another feature is that moral and ethical considerations form part of these underlying dimensions and that the concept of aid stresses mutual liability rather than charity. However, an understanding of aid as a contractual obligation between two parties that negotiate on the basis of mutual trust and respect may obscure the fact that when disagreements occur between such parties, it is the one with the greater economic, political and expert power that is more likely to have the upper hand. This is particularly relevant in the context of the fully developed education sector programme in which international support is provided to national governments as budgetary support. While national budgetary support is advocated by Jagannathan and Karikorpi and by Lind and McNab, Sedere warns against it, as do IsHak and El Gammal. The warnings concern the possibility of infringement of national sovereignty and the risk that international support may replace rather than supplement national funding or that national governments may not act in the interest of the target groups of the programme, namely the poor. In addition, it can be questioned whether dimensions of mutual liability, trust and respect would or should lead to full transparency of both government and agency interests during the negotiation and implementation processes or to full accountability to all stakeholders by both government and agencies. If so, what mechanisms, incentives or sanctions must be put in place for this to occur?

In addition to the questions posed in the papers that follow, a number of others could be asked: Why in the 1990s? Why in reaction mainly to the perceived failure of the previous mode of assistance? Who is driving the introduction of this major reform effort, and what are its preconditions and implications in the national contexts? While answers to some of these questions appear in the papers in the Open File, alternative scenarios remain to be explored, including how major reform efforts have grown naturally out of the development process in specific countries, building on the countries' strengths, and on domestic initiatives and innovation, and responding to the existing institutional and human capacities.

It is hoped that this Open File, which is rich in current thinking and experience on this important topic, will help both to clarify further some of the critical issues and questions and to explore progress made and alternative ideas.

Note

1. This 'Open File: Rethinking educational aid' has been jointly prepared by Lene Buchert and Kees Epskamp. A biographical note on Lene Buchert appears at the beginning of this article. *Kees Epskamp (Netherlands)*. Ph.D. Currently senior education adviser in the Netherlands Organisation for International Co-operation in Higher Education (NUFFIC), The Hague, where his main field of work is the internationalization of higher education. He has conducted large-scale studies of media-supported education projects and communication for development in Latin America and Africa. E-mail:kepskamp@nuffic.nl
2. I acknowledge with gratitude the contributions made to this brief statement by Ad Boeren, Kees Epskamp, Herb Kells and Noel McGinn. It has been written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily represent the views of UNESCO.

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