

# **The External Agenda of Educational Reform: A Challenge to Educational Self-Reliance and Dependency in Sub-Saharan Africa.**

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## **Abstract**

The paper examines, with particular reference to education, the way in which the donor agenda has shifted over the years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Two of the key elements in the shift have been the adoption by the development community of the so-called international targets and millennium goals, as well as new modalities for delivering aid through sector-wide approaches and direct support to national budgets. These developments on the donor side have coincided with a powerful discourse about country ownership of their own national agenda, and the critical importance of the government being in the driver's seat. It is argued that what is missing or much less evident in the debates about targets, aid modalities and country ownership is an analysis of sustainability, and especially in those countries where dependency on external aid in the recurrent budget is running at 50%. It ends by wondering if we are in fact witnessing the emergence of states that will be dependent on the world's welfare for years to come.

## **Introduction**

In a paper to the first Oxford Conference on Education, in September 1991, I analysed some dimensions of the then new paradigm of the development assistance community, and its implications for the internal reform agenda of developing countries, especially in education but more generally in capacity building. Some 12 years later, it may be useful to revisit this subject and see if some of those earlier concerns about the changing donor influence on the national education systems are still valid and relevant. The early paper commented on the 'orientation of educational aid policy away from enclave projects managed and protected by special donor-controlled units to interventions which support locally developed education policies and which are implemented through local sustainable institutions' (King 1992, p.257). It laid out the newer architecture of sustainability, national capacity building and governance.

Our concern in the present analysis is not just to revisit these earlier debates, but to discuss in particular whether the external agenda in the present period continues to hold sway over national educational planning. More specifically, we are interested to examine whether the contemporary donor interests in the country ownership of their partners' own policies is at risk from the sheer weight and influence of the donors' global education agenda.

Today, several donors - but most notably Japan - emphasise the crucial importance of

self-reliance at the recipient country level. This notion suggests not only that the recipient government should own the aid agenda and thus be in the driver's seat - a grossly over-used aid metaphor - but also, and more rarely, that the country should be able to make a substantial contribution towards the financing of the reform agenda, and to its longer term sustainability. In other words, ownership should imply a serious degree of responsibility for implementing and maintaining the education agenda.

This national obligation would clearly be at odds with any policy regime which produced a substantial degree of aid dependency. The argument, in brief, is that the current version of the external agenda for educational reform does indeed accompany a discourse about ownership, partnership and national capacity, but the aid modalities which have been pursued appear to have contributed to very high levels of aid dependency, and particularly amongst countries with relatively fragile capacities and weak economies.<sup>1</sup>

### **The New Version of the External Agenda for Education**

The first thing to be said about the new external agenda for education is that it has features that are shared with other sectors such as health. In other words, there is an explicitly educational content to this agenda, but the donor modalities which have facilitated its development and implementation are common to the delivery of aid in other sectors.

The specifically educational content of the agenda goes back at least to Jomtien - to the World Conference on Education for All - in 1990. Although there had been earlier goals for what could be called the world's global educational agenda - most obviously the great conferences in Addis Ababa (1961), Santiago (1963) and Karachi (1960) - these three had actually developed regionally differentiated agendas for education. There was no question of one-size-fits-all (See *IJED* vol. 1 no. 1, 1981).

Jomtien was unique in proposing an educational vision and agenda for the world - including the industrialised world. But the attempt to fashion a single education agenda for the whole world was not in fact realistic. It soon became clear that despite the consultations about Education for All in N. America, Europe and other OECD countries, the real target of the World Conference was the developing world, and more particularly those countries which had failed to provide basic education for all their citizens (*Norrag News No 7* 1990). Countries which had implemented free and compulsory education for all their children could not easily be retained in the same framework as countries which had very substantial proportions of their school-age children out of school. The Jomtien education agenda was about universal primary schooling, as well as progress on early childhood, adult literacy and nonformal skills development; but the over-riding priority of the main donor agencies at Jomtien was with basic education, defined narrowly as primary schooling (*Norrag News No 8* 1990;

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<sup>1</sup> It is somewhat paradoxical that some of the new aid modalities such as Sector-wide Approaches (SWAPs) and Direct Budget Support, appear to be being implemented in several parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, whilst the old project modality is still being employed in Eastern Europe (King 2004).

Colclough & Lewin 1993).

The narrowing of the original Jomtien agenda of Education for All (EFA) to Schooling for All (SFA) was one of the first steps in the donor determination of the global education agenda.<sup>2</sup> It is not difficult to see how primary education for all children became a more compelling aid object than adult literacy, early childhood education or nonformal skills development - not to mention post-primary education or tertiary. Access to and completion of primary education - especially by girls - rapidly became the core element of the external agenda on education. Primary education was apparently more measurable than nonformal skills development and adult literacy, and it coincided with an increasingly powerful global campaign by NGOs to secure the rights of all children to be schools. Primary education was powerfully promoted by the World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO and a number of influential bilateral donors - such as USAID and Britain's ODA.

But what if national governments could not afford to provide schooling for all - let alone the more demanding education for all? This is where the *World Declaration on Education for All*, from Jomtien, broke some new ground, by making a pledge that would resonate in later international conferences and NGO advocacy campaigns:

Substantial and long-term increases in resources for basic education will be needed. The world community, including intergovernmental agencies and institutions, has an urgent responsibility to alleviate the constraints that prevent some countries from achieving the goal of education for all. It will mean the adoption of measures that augment the national budgets of the poorest countries or serve to relieve heavy debt burdens (WCEFA, Declaration 1990, pp.8-9).

In the *Framework for Action* at Jomtien, this notion of external assistance to reach EFA was made even more explicit:

International funding agencies should consider negotiating arrangements to provide long-term support, on a case-by-case basis, to help countries move toward universal primary education according to their timetable. The external agencies should examine current assistance practices in order to find ways of effectively assisting basic education programmes which do not require capital- and technology-intensive assistance, but often need longer-term budgetary support (WCEFA, Framework 1990, pp.17-18).

There, the words were out in the open - 'longer-term budgetary support' to help the poorest countries reach SFA. Thus, at the very time, as we have mentioned above, that

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<sup>2</sup> In fairness to the WCEFA, it should be stated that the *Framework for Action* at Jomtien did not itself propose identical targets for the whole developing world. Indeed it was a good deal more tentative than Dakar, or the OECD/DAC report (see later) or the Millennium Development Goal process. It stated simply, and tentatively: 'Countries may wish to set their own targets for the 1990s in terms of the following proposed dimensions...' (Framework for Action, 3)

donors were beginning to retreat from ‘their’ projects and move towards policies and programmes ‘owned’ by their partners in the South, the Northern discourse was underlining what those policies should consist of. Equally, the emphasis on the ownership and responsibility of the South for their own priority-setting coincided with a new imperative that the North should assist the weakest countries in particular sub-sectors through budget support. So, along with the new ideas about national capacity, sustainability, autonomy and self-reliance there was appearing a rather different logic about the poorest countries receiving substantial amounts of external funding in order to reach the key Jomtien goal of schooling for all.

What was not made clear in Jomtien was the crucially important relationship between national financial capacity to provide schooling for all and the obligations upon donors and the world community to make this possible, especially in the poorest countries. It was not clear whether external aid would be needed just to speed up a process that the country could then take over; or - very different - was it being suggested by the use of phrases such as ‘long-term’ and ‘budgetary support’ that there were some countries which would not be able to achieve SFA, and which would be on the donor books for the foreseeable future? We shall return to this tension between national autonomy and financial sustainability on the one hand and the implementation of the international agenda with its overtones of aid dependency - if its targets are to be met - on the other.

### **National Self-Reliance and the International Development Targets (1996)**

By the mid-1990s, the global agenda on education had been somewhat redefined within the framework of the International Development Targets (IDTs) of the OECD/DAC which was expressed in *Shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the contribution of development cooperation* (OECD/DAC 1996). Instead of the expanded vision of basic education of Jomtien [which we have noted had already been narrowed by donor priorities to primary education], the IDTs focused on just two aspects of education: universal primary education by 2015 and the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005.

But more important for our purpose here, the OECD/DAC set these two education IDTs within a wider set of six economic, social and environmental targets. What is very intriguing, in terms of donor modalities and donor discourse, is that this short DAC report is absolutely chock-full of language that Ellerman (in this issue) and JICA and Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see Sawamura in this issue) would approve. The argument is all about countries and their peoples being ‘ultimately responsible for their own development’ (Ibid., p.14), about ‘locally-owned country development strategies and targets’ (Ibid., p.14), about development only being possible ‘if developing countries drive the action, with full participation by all of their societies’ stakeholders’ (Ibid., p.11), and a great deal else. Reviewing the achievements of almost 50 years of development, the Report claims: ‘It is clear that success has been achieved only where the people have made sustained efforts to help themselves’ (Ibid., p.7).

And yet, the Report can be interpreted very differently. It is not just the title that suggests that the DAC donors see themselves as playing a key role in ‘shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> century’. But the whole process of identifying these particular six targets, and setting them within a new aid approach that would be much less project-based, and more to do with donor coordination and harmonisation, suggests that the donors continue to have a crucial part in the IDT strategy. Thus, side by side with the rhetoric of national self-reliance and country ownership goes a vision of partnership that has the donors deeply involved in the economies of their Southern partners. Here is a very powerful expression of just that:

One way to reinforce locally-owned strategies may be for donors increasingly to finance those aspects of the strategy calling for public expenditure through the budget of the developing country. This approach is being tested in a number of pilot efforts with a view to ensuring both effectiveness and accountability by the developing country. (OECD/DAC 1996, p.15)

Interestingly, this expression is not restricted to the poorest developing countries. More commonly in the Report, and reminding us of the Jomtien Declaration, is the view that there are many countries where aid will need to be the flip-side of national self-help. It is worth quoting at some length:

Our vision of development is one that fosters self-reliance in which countries and people are less in need of aid. However, many poorer countries simply do not yet have access to other resources sufficient to achieve the outcomes that serve everyone’s interests. Private flows are highly concentrated in a limited number of countries and sectors. The smaller and least developed countries still attract little of the potential source of development finance. Moreover, private resources generally do not flow directly to some key sectors of priority need, such as health and education. Development will depend upon the continued availability of concessional resources, while countries build the capacity to create and mobilise domestic resources and attract private capital flows. For a number of highly indebted poor countries, development will also depend upon concerted national action to alleviate an unsustainable burden of debt. (OECD/DAC 1996, p.16)

Several points are worth making here. That aid flows are seen to be necessary for several categories of country - small, least developed and poor & indebted. Aid flows are also seen to be necessary for crucial IDT sectors such as health and education where private flows cannot be anticipated. Thirdly, there is no clarity about the length of time for which such concessional aid may be required. Fourthly, where there was external support, it could well no longer be in self-standing donor projects, but might be in the form of direct budget support. In other words, what emerged in the Report was a clear sense that there were many countries where development assistance would continue to be necessary, if there was to be

progress towards the IDTs, and through that the reduction of poverty.

We are left with a paradox in *Shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* - that it is one of the main expressions of the necessary policy self-reliance of developing countries. And yet it is also one of the clearest expressions of a set of donor-driven policies, strategies and targets that have been agreed by the OECD member states on behalf of the developing world. Within a little more than a year of its publication, the new UK government had made them 'the centrepiece of its White Paper on International Development' (Short 2001), and a little later the World Bank and the IMF followed suit.

## **Dakar Reinforces the Aid Commitment**

In April 2000, the world community concerned with EFA reconvened, in Dakar, to examine a decade of attempted implementation of the Jomtien agenda. The record of achievement was very mixed. Our purpose in this short article is not to review the World Forum on Education in Dakar (See *Norrag News*, No 26 2000), but rather to look at the strengthening of the international agency commitment to support EFA with external resources. Here, the commitment of the international community went beyond what was stated in Jomtien (see above). It was no longer just some of the poorest countries that were mentioned. The famous Dakar pledge on EFA made it clear that there were a substantial number of countries that were potentially involved:

The international community acknowledges that many countries currently lack the resources to achieve education for all *within an acceptable time-frame*. New financial resources, preferably in the form of grants and concessional assistance, must therefore be mobilised by bilateral and multilateral funding agencies, including the World Bank and regional development banks, and the private sector. *We affirm that no countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by a lack of resources.* (World Education Forum 2000, p.9, emphasis added)

This pledge, which was elaborated in the Extended Commentary after Dakar, made it clear that external funding should be available to the many countries which would otherwise miss the goal set in Jomtien and restated as an IDT. What was not said in Dakar was anything about the time-frame over which such aid would be made available, or anything about the possible trade-offs between reaching the international goals and increased aid dependency. Certainly, there was nothing in the Dakar Framework remotely connected to what a number of donors had been recently analysing - and what a paper for Sida had termed 'the sustainability enigma: aid dependency and the phasing out of projects: the case of Swedish aid to Tanzania' (Catterson & Lindahl 1998). There was no evidence readily available in the Framework that would give any sense of the existing aid dependency of developing countries, at a point immediately before the famous pledge was enunciated. But arguably this could have been important if there had been a genuine concern to balance self-reliance, sustainability

and aid dependence.

## **Millennium Development Goals As the Ultimate External Vision**

By the time, a few months after Dakar, at the September 2000 Millennium Summit, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were elaborated and agreed, a further part of the international architecture of development had been put in place. With the complexity of the now 8 MDGs, rather than 6 IDTs, and their associated 18 targets and 48 indicators, it is not at all clear how this architecture relates to the much proclaimed importance of national planning and national priorities.<sup>3</sup> Now that there is a Millennium Project, and a three year research process in place to demonstrate how all countries will be able to reach the MDGs, we seem to have moved a long way from the tentativeness of Jomtien, or from the very differentiated regional strategies of Karachi, Addis Ababa and Santiago. In some situations, e.g. DFID and the UK, the MDGs have actually become the centrepiece of their development policy, and, in terms of public accountability, DFID has declared it will be judged by its contribution towards the achievement of these Goals.

When the minimum target-setting of the MDGs is compared with holistic and necessarily sector-wide planning of Ministries of Health, Education, Industry etc, it would be surprising if some countries did not identify the MDGs as the donors' agenda rather than their own. For example, no Minister of Education can possibly hope to survive if their only objective is primary education and gender equity in basic education by 2015 and 2005 respectively. I have argued elsewhere:

The claim of the educational IDTs/MDGs is that universal primary education (UPE) should be in place world-wide by the year 2015, and that gender equity in primary and secondary education should be achieved by 2005. Who says? Who signed up to these targets? It would be easy to show that they have been valuable for the politics of the Northern international development community, both the agencies and the NGOs, but very much harder to prove that they are genuinely and widely owned in the South. It could be argued that these targets were part of a new Northern agenda after the end of the Cold War, and that the North now wants the South to own what the North has already decided upon. (Orbit 2003)

Very little research has been done on this, but, arguably, the MDGs are not in fact widely owned in the South at all, except when it is politically expedient to advance free primary education, as has recently happened in a number of East African countries (Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Kenya). It is, of course, not impossible that the national targeting of

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<sup>3</sup> For an extended critique of international targeting of education, see *Norrag News* No. 33, special issue on international and national targets in education: off-centre??, Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh, Also see website, [www.norrag.org](http://www.norrag.org)

free primary education has been advanced by an awareness in the South that grants and loans would be available for this sub-sector, even if they were not for secondary or higher education.

### **MDGs and the Other New Aid Modalities**

The MDGs have accompanied a series of other changes in the way that many donors now prefer to deliver aid. These other changes have gradually been working their way through several donor agencies since the early 1990s, and, though they are not yet accepted by all donors, there has been a lot of support to the new ways of doing aid business. These include so-called sector-wide approaches (SWAPs) and direct budget support (DBS). For many countries, they have also had to accept that their total planning has now to be embedded in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) rather than their own traditional planning processes. All of these have been promoted as building the ownership, capacity and self-reliance of the South, but the sheer complexity of what is now involved, both for the donors and the recipients, in these new models means that the donors are dramatically more central to the implementation of these new modalities than they were in the older project approaches. Also what has been learned over the last 40 years about the successful implementation of large-scale reform projects in education seems not to be being applied widely in the adoption of these new modalities (Smith 2003).

There is in fact likely to be some relationship between the attainment of the MDGs and these new aid approaches. A series of scattered donor projects in all kinds of areas of education is a long way from the dedicated targeting of EFA. The latter may well be better supported by budget support to the education sector or direct budget support. Hence a donor that thinks there is a 'serious commitment to education for all' at a country level, may well be able to argue that budget support is the best way to reinforce this.

### **The Mystery of Aid Dependency in a Sea of Ownership**

At a time when ownership, autonomy and self-reliance are on the lips of many agencies which help Africa, it may be worth looking at the scale of this help. It would appear that there are a substantial number of independent states which are becoming hugely dependent on external aid. What is not clear is whether the focusing of the external aid much more narrowly on particular targets and goals has actually increased the extent of aid dependency. There are just some hints that this may be the case, as a series of initiatives and 'flagship programmes' target different dimensions of the millennium goals in particular countries. For instance, in the first *EFA Global Monitoring Report* it is noted of the Fast Track Initiative [FTI] (which for a set of 18 core countries stipulates a set of key policy and financing norms against which their EFA plans may be evaluated and costed.) that:

...there is an obvious risk that the higher levels of external support entailed by FTI will



increase aid dependence, as the extent of national ownership of plans and policies formulated via the PRSP instrument remains uncertain (UNESCO 2002, p.177).

It may also be the case that compared to the separate financing of a whole series of individual aid projects, the sheer scale of what is needed to achieve EFA, and the availability of SWAPs and Direct Budget Support as new modalities to move larger amounts of money may encourage both donors and recipients to do just that.

Whatever the precise contribution of the newer or older aid modalities, it seems to be agreed that there are a substantial number of countries - many of them in Sub-Saharan Africa - where external aid is running at between 40 and 50% of the government's entire recurrent budget. It is hard to be sure of the figures here as some aid money is allocated to the development budget even when it is recurrent. We can be fairly certain, however, that for instance in Zambia the overall contribution of donors to its recurrent budget is 45%. And of the total budget of the Government of Zambia, 17% is being allocated to education, of which about 60% is provided by external actors.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, Uganda is said to be receiving over 50% of its recurrent budget from outside sources, and Mozambique is receiving at least 40% from external funding. In addition, many of the Francophone African countries are said to be highly aid dependent.

How new the situation is is also not clear, but a number of donors and aid analysts are beginning to worry about the trend, and about some of the unexamined assumptions which support it. Here are just four short commentaries, the first two making general comments, and the others talking about specific Sub-Saharan countries:

My gut feeling is that budget support, the new form of aid, may indulge many poor countries in aid for good. It is like a narcotic drug that damages the human body in the long run. I share some of the African view that budget support is a form of neo-colonialism. (February 2004)

Funders need to be responsible and not encourage over dependency on external financing: the IMF starts getting nervous if external financing goes over 40% of total government budget; there are some examples (Uganda, Mozambique) of recipient countries declining more aid because it will make them too dependent on donors. (February 2004)

I fear the answer to your question - about whether the country is going to be aid dependent for years to come - is yes. For now, if education is to be delivered at all (and even with all the current aid it is a terribly poor offer at terribly low quality) then some others in addition to the government will have to keep on paying. For years to come. (February 2004)

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<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Jan Waltmans of the Netherlands foreign ministry for this information.

The country's recurrent budget is financed to the tune of about 50% by external sources and about 85% of the development/investment budget comes from aid. It is definitely long-term aid-dependent and the donors see it as such, recognising that aid is going to be required in substantial quantities for a long time to come. (February 2004)

These comments underline the kinds of concerns that have of course been around for quite some time.<sup>5</sup> One current question, however, might be whether the much clearer focus of the world's development agenda on the MDGs has encouraged a greater readiness in certain agencies to use the new modalities to put more money directly into the national budget as opposed to in self-standing projects. But an equally compelling question is whether the target-focus of much aid may produce a situation where it is unclear what happens when the targets - e.g. in health or education - are actually reached. What does it signify to reach universal primary education by 2015, but to do so with 60% dependency on external funding? Does it mean that the donors have done their job? Clearly not, if the 'success' in being 'on track' is entirely unsustainable.<sup>6</sup>

### **The End of Self-Reliance and the Emergence of the World's New 'Welfare States'?**

We cannot do much more than touch upon this in this short article, but one of the much less discussed issues in the midst of all the metaphors about being in the driver's seat, country ownership, and autonomy is the question of whether for a number of countries the more appropriate metaphor is that of the 'welfare state'. Not welfare state in the usual sense of a state that has taken responsibility for the health, education and even living allowance for all its people - however poor. But rather a state that is dependent on welfare from the world community for years to come. For some donors, used to thinking of aid as a short term support to national self-reliance, this may seem like thinking the unthinkable. But perhaps others may be beginning to think that what has been missing from the discourse about IDTs and MDGs is the time-frame. Of course there has been a time-frame in one sense - with the target date of 2015 for many of the Goals. But the missing ingredient in all the calculations about the amount of resources that would be necessary to allow the world to reach the goals has been - how long would it be necessary for the donors to stick to the job once the big push to reach the Goals was successful?

It is one thing to help a country deliver the right to basic education; it is quite another thing to agree to help secure that right for the foreseeable future. In other words, would the

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<sup>5</sup> Wangwe's article on 'Africa's aid dependency and marginalisation - What needs to be done?' (1997, p.185) does not deal directly with our concern, but looks to a new partnership that would lead to 'a gradual and smooth reduction of aid as a vital resource in the development agenda'

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Sachs and Pangestu (2004, p.59) argue that donor financing mechanisms will need to be reconfigured in alignment with the MDGs - and with countries' long term national MDG plans.. 'This implies that [countries] require confidence in the stability and trajectory of external assistance and the conditions under which the resource inflows are scheduled to materialize.' But it is less clear what happens to these long-term external commitments once the MDGs have been reached.

development community in Dakar have agreed to the famous pledge if it had not just talked of achieving the goal but of sustained commitment to securing it over the long term?

*We affirm that no countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of [and long term securing of] this goal by a lack of resources (World Education Forum 2000, p.9, parenthesis added).*

The question at the end of our discussion, therefore, is not whether the world is on track to reach the goals but whether the whole targeting process has made less salient and less visible the questions about sustainability and dependency in the world's new 'welfare states'.

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