

Knowledge for Development? Comparing British, Japanese, Swedish and World Bank aid

By Kenneth King and Simon McGrath
Zed Books, London & HSRC Press, Cape Town, pp. 236.

Readers are lucky that serendipity embarked the authors “on a research project ... focused on the discourse and practice of knowledge-based aid” (p. 3). When the “*Joint Evaluation of External Support to Basic Education in Developing Countries*” (commissioned by 13 donor agencies)¹ showed little advances in achievement, and the gloomy evaluations of Education for All (EFA-Jomtien) postponed goals to 2015 it was time for this careful review of the use of knowledge for development and thoughtful suggestions for improving the outcomes of costly investments in education.

The research process carried out by King and McGrath is innovative and could be replicated by donor and lending institutions willing to improve their effectiveness. They reviewed documents; they benefited from years commenting on development strategies and trends; carried out life history interviews with agency staff; identified specific approaches by leading agencies (World Bank, DFID, Sida and JICA); compared these processes; and challenged most underlying assumptions about knowledge-based aid (p. 40). They found that “perhaps the greatest benefit of the ‘discovery’ of knowledge by agencies is its effect of opening up their activities to a new form of scrutiny, which challenges them to follow the fuller logic of what they profess to believe in and do as a result of their belief in knowledge for development” (p. 53).

The description of the different approaches also shows possibilities for sharing and learning. Some agencies assume they have “superior technical expertise and breadth of comparative development experience”, but are “willing to share their knowledge” or to *transfer* the best practices from a range of countries. *Deregulation* is also proposed as an alternative strategy that has some common elements (but also differences) with *self-reliant* strategies. Some strategies emphasize adding missing *inputs* or improving *implementation*, while others look for reducing *constraints* (corruption, fate, oral communication or unpunctuality). In each case the authors show the relationships between power and knowledge and their role in the future aid agenda.

Which is the main obstacle for better use of knowledge by aid agencies? There are competing alternatives: choosing the right goals, selecting effective strategies, providing missing inputs, resources, or project implementation. The book pays special attention to shared proposals to invest in education, to develop the ability to generate new knowledge or acquire it from outside, and the importance of being able to absorb relevant knowledge. It

¹ AUCC (2003) “*Local Solutions to Global Challenges: Towards effective partnership in basic education*” (September 2003), Final Report of the Joint Evaluation of External Support to Basic Education in Developing Countries, The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Hague. The report and annexes are available in www.euforic.org/iob.

comments that “knowledge is understood in a number of, often conflicting, ways” and “look at the ways in which has been used in practice in development co-operation”. In fact, most educational investments continue to be made on the basis of untested or partially tested assumptions about the cost effectiveness of particular interventions. And there may be “little evidence of evaluation leading to significant changes in policies or practices” (p. 151).

Does knowledge-based aid have a future? (p. 209). The book builds an optimistic tension between a positive language of knowledge within agencies and bureaucratic power in place. There is ground for Western groups to carry out comparative testing that define educational achievement gaps. Joint North-South teams can evaluate promising field experiences in the South (p. 43). Long term grants to Southern groups may help to identify key constraints to change. Launching international efforts like the “Eight Nations Study”² may encourage the ability to look at developing problems in a more comprehensive way. All in all, there would be “a significant shift towards agency recognition of and support for indigenous knowledge and national knowledge systems in the South”. It is a relevant starting point.

This book should be a required reading in any course on educational policies and development. Students will easily interact with the book and will understand the need to take into account context and traditions for the design of effective interventions. They will also learn to blend qualitative and quantitative approaches to fully grasp the issues that need to be addressed.

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² This is a collaborative educational research programme (coordinated by the University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education) in which nations with widely differing demographic, political, economic, and cultural characteristics could successfully participate. In the context of educating citizens in the 21st century the relationship of educational investment to economic growth was chosen as a theme, within which a number of different topics have been examined: higher education, language and literacy, education and economic growth, education evaluation and indicators, vocational education, and mathematics and science education. More information in <http://www.gse.upenn.edu/cms/cms.php?id=335>