

Observations on education in developing countries

Reflexions on a mission to São Tomé e Príncipe

Before last weekend I found this [Public Group on Education and Development](#) while looking for topics and groups where I could participate and make a contribution. I liked what I saw, applied for membership and got accepted. Thank you. But before I made my commitment I had decided to read a few documents made available. In the course of my document perusal I read this document:

More and Better Education in Developing Countries, COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT
EUROPEAN COMMISSION, Brussels, 4.2.2010, SEC(2010)121 final

Maybe there are more recent documents that I have not been able to find, but this one made an impression on me. After reading it I was left with a sense of emptiness. Let me explain why. The document is a 20.000 meter level observation. At that altitude one misses the detail on the ground. And that detail is absolutely necessary in order to comprehend and grasp the magnitude and the complexities of the education problem in developing countries as well as the opportunities presented that seem to be constantly missed. At that altitude there is not enough oxygen either.

I recently returned from a two month school project in the small developing country of São Tomé e Príncipe, a two island country off the western coast of equatorial Africa. This was not my first interaction with developing country schools neither it will be the last.

During that short time I was able to observe the socio-economic problems I had observed in other developing countries, and was able to confirm, once again, that for the longest time nothing has been done about them.

Education in developing countries is a multifaceted problem that has been tackled with tunnel vision. A tunnel vision that has failed the 58 million children who do not attend school, as well as all the ones who have been in school and dropped out, as well as all the ones who went to school, completed their studies, and came out ill prepared for life in their own communities, let alone in this complex world of ours.

This tunnel vision has told us that if only we can get these children to attend school by motivating their parents to do so, if only we can provide better school materials, if only we can train and retain better teachers, if only we can get donors to give more money, if only we can get the private sector interested and more active in the education field, if only... we will solve this monstrous problem.

Well, I am not so sure! To support my position let me describe a very typical family in a small developing country. This is a real family and there are many families like this one.

In this family there are four children. A little 6 month old boy, a 6 year old girl who does not attend school, an 11 old boy in elementary school and a 15 year old girl in high school. These children were fathered by three different men. All three have fathered their children, left the mother and moved on to do the same with some other women.

The mother lives in a small rural community with her baby son and the 6 year old daughter. She has to work in the fields in order to get some food on the table. The 6 year old girl has to take care of her baby brother and thus cannot attend school. Their wooden house has one room, no running water, no electricity and a pit latrine in a bad state of

disrepair. Cooking is done on an open fire outside. The terrain around the small shack turns into a mud puddle when it rains. This mud puddle turns fetid within a day under the scorching sun. There is no drainage.

The 11 year old boy lives in a nearby town with his aunt. In his aunt's house there is running water in the yard but not in the house. Electricity is provided by the local supplier from 7:00AM until noon, and then from 3:00PM until midnight. This is the official schedule, the one published in all the statistics. However electricity fails regularly along the whole day. When this happens, and it happens way too often, there is no pressure in the water pipes and people use river water as a substitute. The river is used for personal hygiene. It is also where the laundry is done and the dishes are washed. The water in the river runs murky from the activities by people living in villages upstream from the little boy's village.

In Africa the sun rises at 6:00AM and sets at 6:00PM like clockwork. Elementary school starts at 7:00AM and ends at noon. This boy often goes to school without a meal. He has to walk about one mile to school. There is no running water in this school even though some flushing toilets were built by some friendly organization. Unusable as toilets, this space is used to store the firewood. Boys use the bushes to alleviate themselves. And so do the girls. Every day the teacher demonstrates how to wash their hands by going through the motions. But there is no water to really wash their hands.

By 9:00AM the temperature in the classrooms is soaring above 30°C. The high humidity compounds the problem. The windows are kept open hoping for a breeze but when it rains, and this happens during the whole academic year, windows need to be closed and the temperature soars. The school buildings are not fit to this type of climate. Someone built them as if they were to be used in a temperate climate zone. The CO₂ level is palpable and sleepiness among these poorly fed children is the norm. The teacher keeps shouting to keep them awake. Educational materials are sorely lacking and what little exists is of very poor quality. All this creates an education scenario that is, at best, unfit for the life that awaits them when they leave school as graduates or as dropouts. This education scenario does not even prepare them for high school. It takes a lot of determination to go to school in this small town.

His 15 year old sister lives with her natural father in the same small town. The nearest high school is in another town 9 km away. Her classes start at noon and are finished at 6:00PM. There are no school buses and so she has to walk both ways. She does this with some friends who attend the same school. Some younger, some older, some male, some female. They start their walk around 10:00AM. It is always dark when they return home. Often it is raining. She eats a snack before leaving for school and eats a very poor meal when she gets home at night. Early pregnancies are fairly common and when a girl gets pregnant she cannot attend school any longer. She may attend the adult classes at night. There are no job opportunities and finding a husband through an early pregnancy may just be a ticket to a better life. This is a huge fallacy though, as her mother's and many other women's examples can clearly tell. But at 15 her hormones are wreaking havoc and do not let her think straight.

It is not just will-power that keeps these children in school. It is a daily act of courage and perseverance that does it. What they learn in school has been copied from a developed country and is tailored to an industrialized society. As such it has very little to do with life as they know it and as they are bound to experience it when they leave school. What they learn in school about the dangers of open air defecation, about the benefits of hand washing, personal hygiene, good eating habits, protection of the environment, healthy sexual practices are soon lost and forgotten when they return from school every day. I often wonder if what they are taught in school is ever learned and ever reaches their homes, or if it has always been the other way around. I am afraid it is the latter.

These are all children and they are all influenced by the examples they see in the adults. They are children and are all vulnerable to the advances of the adult community whose young males sit idle along the streets. Many of these young males went to school but live in a community where there are no jobs and no prospects in life. The young women who went to school are now mothers slaving away at home like their own mothers. With children to take care of and no husbands.

These problems have to be addressed together with education. Education cannot be restricted to children. It has to target adults of all ages. Education alone, the way it has been practiced, leaving out the adult community, leaving out a whole effort of improving the living conditions and the level of human dignity will continue to fail the 58 million and all the others who are in school but will come out to a real world that is not what the schools are preparing them for.

For education to work one has to pair it with community development initiatives, with adult education initiatives, with infrastructure building projects, with sanitation, drinking water and electricity availability. This is what we have in our developed countries. An education system that is supported by educated parents, running water, toilets that function, roads, transportation, electricity and work opportunities. We know that when any of these fail education suffers and often fails. Why would it be any different in developing countries?

It is no different in developing countries. Education alone is not a solution to development in any community. It certainly has not been and will never be in developing countries for as long as it is treated in isolation from the stark reality of the surrounding communities. In these communities these schools are doomed to fail.

I am looking forward to whatever objectives this group may accomplish. I do sincerely hope we can change the existing paradigm and stop throwing so much effort and money into the hands of private interests with no obvious interest in education or development.

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