At issue: World Bank as a global education ministry?
Proposed strategy lacks a focus on human rights

In early 2011 the Bank will approve a new education strategy amid indications that international goals on education will not be met. Zoe Godolphin of University of Bristol argues that the Bank's proposals fail conceptually because they do not accept education as a human right. They fail pragmatically because they continue to advocate a template approach instead of supporting genuinely country-driven priorities in education planning.

Since early last year the World Bank has been working on its "Education Strategy 2010", which will guide the role of the Bank in education for the next ten years (see *Update* 70). In a May 2010 consultation on the draft strategy in Washington, the Bank's director for education Elizabeth King summarised the main points of the strategy for the audience. That she could present clearly defined roles for the Bank in education development, *prior* to eight months of consultations and board approval, and that these have not changed through the subsequent consultation process, is emblematic of the Bank's approach.

There may, however, be a clear logic to the Bank's thinking. The education strategy is, in effect, a global vehicle for the commercialisation of education, which creates tension with the key principles of a *right* to education. According to the UN these principles are availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability. Furthermore, the Bank draft strategy is not committed to allowing space for countries to design their own policies. Instead, it appears comfortable with using its financial products and its considerable influence to push policy outcomes, despite its claiming a politically neutral mandate.

History of the Bank on education

The Bank's approach to education has generally been determined by human capital theory. This economic approach prioritises investment returns on education in the form of greater productive ability of individuals as a result of education. The Bank started with a project focus in the 1960s, before moving to a sectoral focus in the 1970s. Under structural adjustment policies in the 1980s, the Bank's education team moved to the human resources department and educational funds for countries diminished in the context of reducing the role of the state and the substitution of state funding by the payment of fees by students. This affected the availability of and access to education, because as fees were introduced, students dropped out under pressure to contribute to family welfare. In the 1990s, the Bank promoted decentralisation of education whilst promoting education for knowledge economies, which led to greater provision of private education, particularly through the involvement of the International Finance Corporation (IFC, the Bank's private sector arm).

Problems with selectivity in access to education were exacerbated by the IFC's efforts to guide investment and regulatory environments for education. Decentralisation was also heavily promoted by the Bank, as devolving oversight was viewed as a means to control and manage recurrent costs, without providing additional financing. Education also became embedded in Country Assistance Strategies and Poverty Reduction Strategies, further reducing policy space because countries became locked-in to the Bank's promotion of one path to development under the Comprehensive Development Framework. Discussions about investment in education focussed on expenditure for the Millennium Development Goals after their introduction in 2000, rather than public investment for education more broadly.

What does the strategy look like?

The new draft strategy signals a shift in the Bank's focus on education towards a "systems approach" (see box for a history of the Bank's education work). An education system is defined as "the service delivery relationships", including the regulatory environment. The strategy marks a shift from the donor-led education for all (EFA) approach, adopted in the 1990s, explicitly excluding any reference to EFA targets. The Bank's approach is more informal and labelled a "learning for all" approach (supported through market dynamics). It targets people from birth to twenty-four years of age in fragile countries, low-income countries and middle-income countries (according to Bank country classifications).

The Bank argues that learning is a broader concept than education because it includes "broad competencies" – not merely literacy and numeracy skills – and non-formal and non-public methods and sites for learning. "Effective" learning environments, according to the Bank, include supply-side inputs (teachers and equipment) and processes of "transformation" that can direct inputs to outcomes such as capacity building at local, national and regional levels. The final draft strategy implies that outcomes will be measured in terms of service delivery against indicators promoted by the Bank, within the context of greater self-management by providers. According to the draft strategy: "students (and other stakeholders) also have a political voice [via the market] to advocate for more accessible and better learning opportunities" because this logically follows from an education system designed around inputs and outputs and autonomy at "provider level".

The Bank's draft strategy maintains that technological and skills development lead to greater productivity that will alleviate poverty. The reasons for a new strategy include the need to master new technologies, respond to increased demand for education given population changes, and to harmonise education plans with donor efforts.

Missing human rights framework

Within the education field the Bank has promoted a commercial approach to education, undermining the efforts of the UN to promote education as a human right – despite the fact that the Bank is nominally a specialised agency of the UN. The Bank, however, claims that it cannot directly protect human rights due to its supposedly politically neutral position.

The need for education is universal and thus primary and secondary education is often made compulsory, demonstrating that it clearly falls under governmental responsibility. As there are no rapid monetary returns to investment in primary education at the aggregate level, it is not profitable for private investment and public funding is required. Private provision of education can put payment burdens on families and may result in more children involved in child labour instead of going to school. Education is not only an end in itself, but also has a multiplier effect by facilitating the provision of and access to other basic rights such as women's rights, clean running water, food, shelter, health and livelihoods, not to mention the ability to participate in political and community affairs.

The former Special Rapporteur for the UN on the right to education has thus argued that free primary education is so essential to individual well-being and the political security of a nation that it must be considered compulsory under human rights law.

There are three main ways that the Bank's approach is undermining the right to education. First, the Bank has not adequately used its influence to ensure full funding to achieve the EFA goals. Until the 1990s, the Bank was actively encouraging the charging of fees for primary education, in direct contradiction to the notion that all children have a right to education irrespective of wealth. While the Bank has formally moved away from promoting user fees, there are worrying signs that the failure to meet the gap between available finance for education and developing country needs could lead to reversals on free education provision. The draft strategy, however, fails to address how countries can become self-sustaining in education investment. The Bank should support flexible funding modalities which can cover the core costs of the public education system, rather than leaving countries dependent on private-sector provision of education. Country capacity needs to be developed to ensure that countries' education systems and infrastructure are not vulnerable to the needs of private investors who are motivated to minimise costs to enhance profits, and who may not have a focus on ensuring rights and meeting social goals.

Second, the promotion of private investment and provision of education by the Bank downplays – and undermines – the role of public provision. The IFC policy on education argues that there is no reason why primary education should necessarily be publicly provided. However, public provision, which is publicly accountable, has proved to be the essential element in all efforts to achieve education for all.

Third, the rationale that education should be valued as a means of accumulating human capital to increase labour productivity has meant that education has been valued for the development of skills for work. This is in stark contrast to the holistic rights-based view of the role of education, which recognises the value of the other outcomes that education can support, such as individual well-being and social cohesion. The Bank's approach risks allowing education content to be dictated by investor demands, instead of driven by a country's own strategies.

Undermining ownership

On top of the failure to recognise and support the human right to education, the proposed education strategy puts the Bank in a central and highly political role in education reform across the globe, making a mockery of its claims to be 'politically neutral'. The Bank has nominated for itself the roles of policy-maker (in the range of policy choices offered to countries), regulator (in the participation and supervision of the design of national education policy), and enforcer (through loan conditionality and availability of technical assistance). It is arguable that the Bank is now positioning itself as a new global education ministry.

While the Bank argues that it will use "differentiated priorities according to need and capacity" to guide its work, it still takes a template approach for categories of countries. One-size-fits-all policies are crafted for the three categories: fragile states, low-income countries and middle-income countries. Loan conditionality needs to be addressed in the draft strategy to ensure that educational opportunities are not tied to private investor commitment.

The Bank's proposed policy of education decentralisation and facilitation of school autonomy have been identified as adversely affecting country ownership of national development plans. These policies weaken government responsibility for education policies and foster a lack of political will. A regulatory environment that relies on decentralisation and privatisation to meet basic needs may be less costly for the Bank and its clients to establish but does not address the issue of the impact of funding for recurrent costs. A lack of centralised control may mean that the provision of basic needs is then susceptible to unpredictable financing and a lack of systematic coherence in a country's developmental vision.

To overcome this issue, the self-determination of states and the human rights entitlements of people affected should be recognised by the Bank. This would entail the Bank supporting genuinely country-driven national education plans in a collaborative manner and supporting the development of a country's vision for education, rather than taking the lead and claiming a role in microeconomic matters such as teacher selection. This is an ideal opportunity for the Bank to implement the "open data, open solutions" approach introduced by Bank president Robert Zoellick in his September 2010 speech 'Democratizing Development Economics' and thus escape the Bank's own Independent Evaluation Group's criticism that the Bank follows a one-size-fits-all approach.

Furthermore, the draft strategy promotes the idea of "political capital" accumulation through a systems approach, but the reliance on narrow economically-defined Bank assessment models (such as parts of the IDA country ranking model and the System Assessment and Benchmarking for Education Results), minimises the political value of education as a human right. Side-stepping current rights-based approaches to education in favour of a systems approach, based on cost-benefit analysis, brings extra costs by forcing countries to realign their policy environments. The policy and financial guidelines of the Bank in relation to education systems strengthening should reflect compliance with human rights standards and the right to an education. The recent efforts by the UN Special Rapporteur on transnational corporations should be applied to external corporate investors in a country's education. Efforts should be made to clarify and secure the human rights obligations of philanthropists.

Conclusion

The draft strategy advocates a role for the Bank in promoting an "enabling environment" but avoids acknowledging a right to education as an enabling instrument. The promotion of development goals in education, rather than an explicit human rights focus and cooperation with UN human rights organs, reduces human rights to a policy choice, despite – for example – Mary Robinson arguing that human rights are not political.

The Bank seems to be casting itself as a global education ministry, adopting a political role in the regulation of education according to economic values. The Bank has designed an education system under a harmonised global economic framework that reduces the value of education to a productive service and depoliticises the role of government in education, learning and development. The Bank and its board should re-examine its proposed strategy to open up space and allow time for developing countries to articulate their own education plans. Finally, the Bank should accept the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), and acknowledge the right to education.

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For a longer, fully-referenced version of this briefing, see:
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