

Six reasons why the World Bank should be debarred from education

Katarina Tomasevski

Nobody is likely to publicly assert that primary school children should pay for their education because that would sound unacceptably cruel, but this is exactly what children are forced to do. This denial of their right to education is hidden behind quantitative targets and evasive vocabularies used by global educational bureaucracies. The 2006 Global Report is unapologetically critical of their work. It focuses on the conversion of education from free to for-fee and on the World Bank as the key architect of this model. Its six features exemplify what a huge obstacle it constitutes for making education all-encompassing, free and compulsory.

1. Top-down global central planning has supplanted bottom-up participatory design of education

Global financial support for education is conditioned by quantitative benchmarks, which are derived from a World Bank statistical construct. Niger is, then, required to reduce the repetition rate in primary school to 15 per cent as a condition for debt relief. That high repetition rate may be a consequence of school children's failure to understand the language of instruction. Or else, it could result from the teachers' salaries being too low for them to teach, hence children cannot learn. Such symptoms can be statistically suppressed without addressing their causes. Real improvements necessitate addressing and solving real problems. The key problem - impoverishment of public education - is exacerbated by the conversion of education from a free public service into a freely traded service. The first step is, as in Mauritania, the formal introduction of private schooling by the World Bank, which then enables the IFC (International Finance Corporation) to amplify private education through its loans. All this is done in American English, which very few of those affected understand, in Mauritania or in Niger. Those most likely to understand why the imposition of a top-down model never works, the teachers, are excluded because they would otherwise demand respect of their human rights.

2. Compulsory education as a free public service has been obliterated

More than 80 years ago, the oldest international human rights law mandated free and compulsory education for all children up to the minimum age of employment. Thenceforth it specified safeguards for labour rights and trade union freedoms. This provides worldwide protection for the rights of children and their teachers, but has been excluded from the World Bank's model. Financial responsibility for education has been transferred from governmental to family budgets, dooming poor children to grow up without the qualification and socialization which education should provide. Government's abandonment of public education was hailed by the World Bank until it proved, as in Pakistan, to be a global security threat. 'Private' religious schools were praised for 'delivering results' without creating any cost for the government. Panic has ensued when the lack of knowledge of who was teaching the young and what they were taught highlighted why education is so important to be defined as a public responsibility.

3. Definition of free education has been distorted to disguise its real cost

Making education compulsory obliges governments to ensure that education is free so that no child is excluded, no matter how poor. The World Bank avoids the term 'compulsory' and uses 'fee-free'. School fees, the notorious World Bank recipe from its structural adjustment era, are eliminated in accordance with its subsequent rhetorical commitment to free education. This commitment is not real and education is not really free. It is fee-free but charges continue under the name of levies or financial contributions. Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya went through loud promises of free education, followed by retractions of what that 'free' did not include. Teachers' salaries constitute the largest part of educational budgets and they were harmed most. Real teachers have been replaced by contract-teachers at a fraction of the cost in Benin and Burkina Faso, or by quasi-teachers as they are called in India. Thus, public education has been sufficiently impoverished to enable poor indebted governments to continue servicing their debts.

4. Impoverished primary education cannot yield its assumed benefits

Manipulation of statistics easily creates rosy images of what thus impoverishment primary education can accomplish. It is supposed to help reduce poverty, enhance gender empowerment and contribute to social cohesion. Primary school is sufficient to tick off a country for having complied with the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals). However, children are merely eleven (as in Jamaica) or nine years old (as in Armenia or Sri Lanka) when they finish primary school. They cannot help reduce poverty because they are legally prohibited from working. Education is supposed to enable girls to marry later and fails them when it is much too short to make a difference. All children are deprived of the right to vote and cannot challenge the cruelty of this model. This is why education is defined as their birthright and it should be protected by law.

5. The absence of safeguards against human rights violations increases the debt burden of the victims and their children

Dictators have excellent reasons for depriving people of education, lest they would rebel against tyranny and oppression. Such purposeful denial of education triggers international financial support because educational statistics look awful. Human rights violators generously allow international financing of primary education and meanwhile increase their military expenditure as is the case in China and Ethiopia. World Bank loans transfer debt servicing from one generation to another, and children deprived of education will nevertheless pay its cost. The loans which supported the dictatorship in Indonesia or the preparation of genocide in Rwanda are serviced by the children of their victims.

6. Policies ought to be based on evidence, not opinions unsupported by facts

The self-interest of any bureaucracy is to expand its powers in new areas to tackle the problems which its previous policies created as well as to avoid being held accountable for such problems. This is reflected in the World Bank's failings of omission (whereby its own introduction of 'school fees' in the 1980s is blocked out) and the failings of commission. Evidence on free or for-fee educational policies and practices is supplanted by assessments of the World Bank's country teams. There is no information on the questions (is education free of all costs or merely fee-free?), the criteria (will assessments change with each change of the country team?) nor is there any corroborating evidence for the proffered opinions. One is supposed to trust the World Bank.

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