

# DEPLOYING EDUCATIONAL AID FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN SOUTH ASIA

「南アジアにおける貧困緩和のための教育支援の展開」

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## Abstract

This paper evaluates the efficacy of development aid for education to alleviate poverty in several of the poorest South Asian nations. The importance of development goals such as the MDGs and SDGs are considered in relation to the effects of globalisation, competing economic theories of development, and the role of major donors in setting the aid agenda. It is argued that aid distribution needs to be more closely aligned to the development goals and specific needs of individual countries, and that access to quality education should be prioritised.

Keywords : aid, development, education, globalisation, MDGs, SDGs

## 要 旨

本稿は、南アジアの最貧国のいくつか、具体的には、インド、バングラデッ

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シュ、そしてネパールにおける貧困軽減のための教育を対象とした開発援助の有効性を評価する。MDGs（ミレニアム開発目標）やSDGs（持続可能な開発目標）のような開発目標の重要性を、グローバル化、競合する開発の経済理論、そして、援助計画の設定における主要な援助資金供与者の役割との関係において考察し、援助の配分は開発目標とそれぞれの国が持つ特定のニーズとより密接につながったものでなければならず、質の高い教育へのアクセスが最優先されるべきであることを論じる。

## Introduction

Our world is plagued by hunger, deprivation and widespread inequality. For example, over 800 million people live in extreme poverty; around 75 million children who should be in primary school are not; and every year, about 10 million young children die from preventable causes. Currently, the greatest hunger burden in the world is in South Asia, where around 280 million people lack adequate food (United Nations 2015a, p. 1). The international community has responded with hundreds of billions of dollars in development aid to address these and other problems (Klees 2010, p. 7). Since the 1990s, educational aid projects have played a major role in global efforts to eradicate poverty and there is now a widespread consensus on the importance of educational investment as a key strategy in the assault on poverty and the promotion of economic growth and development (Tarabini 2010, p. 204).

Today, there is little doubt that education can reduce poverty and stimulate economic development. UNESCO (2008, pp. 22–4) claims that education and poverty are connected in three main ways: firstly, better educated people can earn more money; secondly, better quality education improves local

economies, which in turn increases incomes ; and thirdly, education provides additional social benefits that help reduce poverty, such as lower fertility and infant mortality, better care of children, and increased participation of women in paid work (p.22). UNESCO further argues that education, particularly quality education, is crucial in helping people to escape from poverty (p.24). Therefore, universal, easily accessible and quality education is necessary to alleviate poverty, empower women, combat disease, increase food crop production, and stimulate a country's economic development. However, not all researchers agree on prioritising donor aid to education, and the relationship between education and the alleviation of global poverty is complex and politically contested.

This paper examines the interaction between development aid, education, and poverty alleviation in three of the poorest developing countries of South Asia : India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. In particular, the issue of development aid for education is considered in relation to the recently expired Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 1, 2, 3 and 8, and the newly implemented Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is argued that aid distribution needs to be more closely aligned to the development goals and needs of individual countries. Also, several other related issues are considered, including the changes generated by globalisation, competing theories of economic development, and the role of major donors, especially the World Bank, in setting the aid agenda. This is followed by discussion of conditional aid and economic dependency. In the final part, aid delivery problems and access to quality education are examined. First of all, it is necessary to briefly consider development theories and to define some important terms.

## **Development Theories and Key Concepts**

There is no single, undisputed meaning of ‘development’ in the international aid arena. In analysing the role of educational aid in poverty alleviation, several theories of development – human capital, modernisation, dependency, and globalisation – are used in this paper to help explain the ideological underpinnings of international aid providers’ agendas. For example, human capital theory emphasizes the development potential of educated and productive human beings and has had a considerable influence on the education policies and development strategies of the World Bank, OECD, and UNESCO (Fagerlind & Saha 1989, p. 50). The theory is also evident in the underlying rationale of the MDGs and SDGs, and according to Heyneman and Lee (2016, p. 10), “... human capital, in the form of educated populations, is a *sine qua non* of development.”

Altogether, many different theories of development have been proposed since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and most of these are broadly defined in Table 1 below. For each perspective, the major motivation and goal has been to eradicate poverty and to achieve ‘development’. Today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ‘sustainable development’ is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations 2015b, p. 1).

‘Poverty’, of the extreme kind that exists in Third World countries, might best be defined as an inability to meet basic human needs due to a lack of essential resources such as food, shelter, clean water, and sanitation (synthesized from Spagnoli 2009, p.1). ‘Extreme poverty’ is currently defined by international aid

Table 1 : Theories of Development

Period	Perspectives	Meanings of development
1800s	Classical political economy	Remedy for progress, catching up
1850 >	Colonial economics	Resource management, trusteeship
1870 >	Latecomers	Industrialisation, catching up
1940 >	Development economics	Economic growth – industrialisation
1950 >	Modernisation theory	Growth, political and social modernisation
1960 >	Human capital theory	Capacitation, enlarging people’s choices
1970 >	Dependency theories	Accumulation, empowering the oppressed
1970 >	Alternative development	Human flourishing
1980 >	World systems theory	‘Core’ states promoting growth of ‘periphery’ states
1980 >	Globalisation	Global economic integration and capitalism
1980 >	Neoliberalism	Economic growth obtained through : – deregulation, liberalisation, privatisation
1990 >	Critical development theory	Alternative forms of development validated
1990 >	Post–development	Authoritarian engineering
2000 >	Millennium Develop’t Goals	Structural reforms
2016 >	Sustainable Develop’t Goals	Broader structural reforms

(Synthesized from Nederveen Pieterse 2010, p. 10)

agencies as people living on less than US \$ 1.25 a day (Kendall 2009, p. 419). The terms ‘Third World’ or ‘South’ as used in this paper are synonymous with ‘developing’; opposite in meaning to ‘developed’, First World’ and the ‘North’. Another term is ‘underdeveloped’, which researchers use in discussions of Dependency, Liberation, and similar theories.

The term ‘aid’ is shorthand for ‘development assistance’, or simply ODA (official development assistance), and it refers to ‘development aid’, ‘international aid’, ‘bilateral aid’ and ‘multilateral aid’ (though not ‘foreign aid’ or ‘overseas aid’, which are obsolete). Aid may also include development loans,

but it does not include humanitarian aid (Cremin & Nakabugo 2012, p. 501).

In contrast with ‘development’ theory, the concept of ‘education’ is relatively settled and uncontested. The dominant understanding of ‘education’ in the twenty-first century international development arena is Western-style, state-provided, mass schooling of the kind that originated in nineteenth century Prussia and spread throughout Europe and then to the United States and most of the world. This model of education entails mass, standardised, formal schooling on academic subjects. It features schedules, classrooms, desks, chairs, and textbooks. Also, this model of education is regarded by contemporary international development agencies as central to creating a ‘modern’ nation-state, and central to a country’s ‘modern’ economic growth and international acceptance (Kendall 2009, p. 422). It is this model of formal schooling that informed the international development framework of the Millennium Development Goals, which are considered next.

### **The Role of MDGs in Combating Poverty**

In 2000, the United Nations adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were a commitment by the international community to promote human development through supporting worldwide social and economic progress. The MDGs included 8 goals, 21 targets and 60 indicators. These set of goals constituted an agreed framework to measure global development progress from 1990 until the end of 2015, requiring a globally united effort to :

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger,

2. Achieve universal primary education,
3. Promote gender equality and empower women,
4. Reduce child mortality,
5. Improve maternal health,
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases,
7. Ensure environmental sustainability,
8. Develop a global partnership for development (United Nations 2000).

Among the foregoing, MDGs 1, 2, 3, and 8 are particularly relevant to the poverty–education nexus. MDG 1 declares: “Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger”. The related two targets to be achieved by 2015 are to “reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day” and “reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger”. Here ‘extreme poverty’ refers to a person living on less than US\$ 1.25 a day, which is an economic definition. But ‘extreme poverty’ may also mean an inability to meet basic human needs due to a lack of essential resources such as food, shelter, clean water, and sanitation (Spagnoli 2009, p.1), and it therefore limits a person’s ability to fully participate in society.

The second goal, MDG 2, aimed to achieve universal primary education (UPE) by 2015. It states that education contributes to disease and poverty eradication, and enables people to have a voice in society. Another specifically educational goal is MDG 3, which sought to eliminate gender disparity in all levels of education by 2015 (United Nations 2000). The final listed goal, MDG 8: “Build a global partnership for development” is broken down into seven specific targets (Targets 12–18), including the freeing up of trade between countries ;

more generous aid and improved debt relief programmes for poverty reduction; greater cooperation with the private sector to address youth unemployment, provide access to affordable health care, and facilitate access to the benefits of new technologies (United Nations 2000).

By the deadline of December 2015, not all the MDGs were realised globally, but significant progress was made. For example, extreme poverty declined from 1.9 billion in 1990 to 836 million in 2015; net primary school enrolments in developing countries increased from 83 per cent in 2000 to 91 per cent in 2015, and many more girls are now in school compared to 2000, marking the virtual elimination of gender disparity in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Maternal mortality declined by 45 per cent worldwide since 1990, and in South Asia it declined by 64 per cent between 1990 and 2013. Another improvement occurred in global under-five mortality decreasing from 90 to 45 deaths per 1,000 live births between 1990 and 2015. Furthermore, ODA from developed countries increased by 66 per cent between 2000 and 2014 (United Nations 2015a, pp.1–2).

However, despite the foregoing achievements, progress has been uneven across countries, regions, and beneficiaries, and too many people remain impoverished and disadvantaged due to gender, age, disability, ethnicity or geographic location. Greater efforts will be needed to reach the most vulnerable people (United Nations 2015c, p. 3). It is hoped that what was achieved by the MDGs can now be built on with an improved set of goals.

## **The Sustainable Development Goals 2030**

Closing the chapter of the MDGs, the UN, in September 2015, established the Sustainable Development Goals, comprising 17 new goals with 169 targets and 304 indicators to show compliance. Officially known as ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’, the set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a broader intergovernmental agreement, acting as a successor to the MDGs. Many people are now hoping that these goals for sustainable development will support and reinvigorate aid activities over the course of the next 15 years to build on the successes of the MDGs. In brief form, the goals are :

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015b)

Though the SDGs build on the eight MDGs, they are much broader and more ambitious in scope. The new agenda “addresses the three dimensions of sustainable development: social, economic and environmental, as well as important aspects related to peace, justice and effective institutions” (United Nations, 2015d, pp. 1–2). However, though only recently implemented, the SDGs have already been criticized. For example, Hickel, a British economist, argues that in relation to the overarching goal of eliminating extreme poverty, US\$ 1.25 is inadequate for human subsistence and should be increased to about US\$ 5 a day (Hickel 2016). Also, a commentary in *The Economist* asserts that the 169 targets for the SDGs are too numerous, “sprawling,

misconceived, and a mess” when compared to the more manageable MDGs. The same article also criticises the goals for ignoring local contexts and fostering “cookie-cutter development policies” that are likely unsuited to individual recipient countries (The Economist 2016, p. 14). The following section provides specific examples of the results of MDGs in South Asia.

### **South Asian Countries’ Progress vis-à-vis MDGs**

Today, South Asia has the largest concentration of poverty, hunger, and deprivation in the world. In fact, the region is home to 37 per cent of the world’s extremely poor people, representing the largest concentration of poor globally (UNESCAP 2016, pp. 5 – 7). Furthermore, countries in South Asia face the world’s greatest hunger burden, with about 280 million undernourished people (United Nations, 2015a, p. 1). However, progress in reducing poverty in the region has been substantial since the MDGs were launched in 2000.

The extreme poverty rate in South Asia has declined from 52 per cent in 1990 to 17 per cent in 2015. Also, an even greater success has been the achievement of gender equality in primary and secondary education. In 1990, only 74 girls were enrolled in primary school for every 100 boys in South Asia. Today, 103 girls are enrolled for every 100 boys. Unfortunately, however, there are still too many out-of-school children – about 36 million – in South Asia (United Nations, 2015a). To ascertain the extent of progress made in achieving the MDGs in specific areas, three of the poorest developing countries in South Asia – India, Bangladesh, and Nepal – are considered by using UNICEF statistical data to construct a profile of each country.

Firstly, India (population 1.24 billion people) is a wealthy South Asian country with the world's fourth-largest economy. However, more than 400 million of India's people – or one-third of the world's poor – live in poverty (World Bank 2016). Also, around 65 per cent of urban and rural households lack improved sanitation facilities. However, there has been remarkable progress in reducing the child mortality rate by more than half since 1990, and life expectancy is now around 66 years. Also, adult HIV prevalence is less than 0.3 per cent. However, school retention rates need improving. Though primary school participation rates through grade 5 are quite high at 84 per cent, the participation rates for secondary school rapidly diminish for both sexes (58 per cent for males; 49 per cent for females), which is perhaps attributable to teenagers being needed to work at home or to take up paid work to supplement their family's meagre income. The total adult literacy rate is only 63 per cent (UNICEF 2015).

Secondly, in Bangladesh (population 161 million), a much smaller South Asian country adjoining India's eastern border, around 43 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. However, child mortality has dropped by 72 per cent since 1990, and life expectancy is now around 71 years, an increase of 18 years since 1980. Adult HIV prevalence is 0.1 per cent., a little lower than in neighbouring India. The primary school participation rate through grade 5 is relatively good at 93 per cent. However, the participation rates for both sexes in secondary school drop to around half, and the reasons for this may be similar to those in India. Also, the total adult literacy rate is only 58 per cent, which is less than in India (UNICEF 2015).

Nepal (population 28 million) is a small landlocked country in the Himalayan Mountains, immediately North of India. In 2011, almost 25 per cent of the population was living below the international poverty line of US\$ 1.25 per day. The most recent available figures (in 2012) show life expectancy is 68 years, and adult HIV prevalence is 0.3 per cent. The child mortality rate has been reduced dramatically from 14.2 per cent in 1990 to less than 4 per cent in 2013, and enrolment rates to grade 5 of primary school are an impressive 95 per cent. However, the total adult literacy rate in 2011 was only 57 per cent, a deficiency that is likely attributable to fairly low participation rates in secondary school of 74 per cent for males and 66 per cent for females (UNICEF 2015).

Overall, impressive gains toward reducing poverty have been identified in each of the three countries profiled, particularly in the reduction of child mortality rates and achieving gender equality in primary education. However, student achievement levels have been low in most countries of South Asia, and the quality of education provided, especially in rural areas, is often inadequate (UNESCAP 2016, p. 7). Also, the three countries profiled in the foregoing need to ensure that every teenager attends secondary school in order to help achieve further reductions in poverty. UNESCO claims that educated girls are likely to marry later and have fewer children, who in turn will have improved chances to survive, eat better and receive better education (UNESCO 2008, p. 24). Today, the international organisation and provision of aid to developing countries is an enormous undertaking that involves numerous participants.

## **The International Community of Aid Providers**

The international community of aid providers is very large, including

bilateral (USAID, DFID, CIDA, NORRAD, JICA, and GTZ) and multilateral (the UN, the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO) organisations (Kendell 2009, p.420). The UN itself includes several agencies, such as UNESCO, UNDP, and UNICEF that are central players in global development. In addition, recent years have seen a substantial increase in new development players, including international government organisations (IGOs), such as the International Development Association (IDA). Also, there are International Non-government Organisations (INGOs), NGOs, bilateral donors from developing countries (e.g. India), vertical funds, private foundations, civil society organizations, Christian charities, and public-private funders (Knuttsen & Lindberg 2012, p. 817).

Development aid is mainly funded by contributions from about 35 member states of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) who have each agreed to the UN target of 0.7 per cent of their gross national income (Thiele et al 2006, p. 1). Between 2000 and 2015, the ‘global partnership for development’ goal (MDG 8) encouraged participation of the private sector and public-private partnerships in development programmes. Since 2004, it has become common for UN agencies and other international development agencies to join in partnership agreements with private companies. Similarly, private companies have increasingly accepted important roles as development partners for governments in developing countries.

One example of a multilateral partnership involving the private sector has been the Global Education Initiative and its launching of the One Laptop per Child project, which aims to improve education of schoolchildren in developing

countries with inexpensive laptop computers (Knutsson & Lindberg 2012, p. 813). In Asia, education is considered to be an aid priority by many bilateral agencies, with Japan's JICA devoting 14 per cent of its aid budget to education, Australia's AusAid 17 per cent, and South Korea's KOICA 25 per cent. One reason posited for Japan and South Korea emphasizing education in their bilateral aid is that both economies have developed as a result of large investments in human capital (Heynemann and Lee 2016, p.2).

Educational aid to India is comparatively very large, and was until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century larger than for any other country in the world (Colclough and De 2010, p. 498). In the early 1990s, educational aid enabled the Indian government to launch its first locally developed education project, called the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP). Aid-support to DPEP from the World Bank, EU, DFID, UNICEF and the Netherlands provided for teacher training, textbook development and new infrastructure. In retrospect, the aid donors believe that their support to DPEP was effective because it helped to improve school quality, innovation, and it facilitated more inclusive education for students (Colclough and De 2010, p. 502–506).

Japan is the largest bilateral donor to Bangladesh, providing about US\$ 8 billion since the 1970s. Unlike other donors, however, Japan has focused its aid on physical infrastructure, assuming a leading role in funding several major bridges in Bangladesh, including the Jamuna, Paksey, and Rupsa bridges (Quibria and Islam 2015, pp. 13–14). The two main sources of multilateral aid to Bangladesh are the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), both of which provided financial assistance targeted to promote female

education. In particular, the World Bank's aid projects contributed to reducing gender gaps in school enrolments and promoting income-generating activities, though the ADB's initiatives made no significant improvement (Quibria and Islam 2015, pp. 11 – 13)

Overall, the international communities' aid activities appear to conform mainly to human capital theory (discussed above in 'Development Theories') and modernisation theory, which sees developed countries such as the USA and Western Europe as models to be emulated by developing countries, and that a refusal to adopt modern values and habits, such as Western education, is the cause of poverty. Fagerlind & Saha (1989, p. 16) claim that modernisation has been an implicit assumption underlying much development funding by governments and international organizations. The theory proposes five stages of development in an evolutionary path where each stage is assumed to automatically lead to the next one and that poverty will somehow be alleviated by adopting modern (or Western) values (Fagerlind & Saha 1989, pp. 16 – 17). Less clear is how developing countries can quickly achieve what took the West around three hundred years to accomplish (Lerner 1958, p. 65). To attain 'modernisation' objectives, capitalism was deployed. Subsequently, capitalism propelled by the forces of economic globalisation has had arguably brutal affects in developing countries, such as India, Bangladesh, and Nepal.

### **The World Bank's Promotion of Globalisation and Neoliberalism**

Among the numerous aid donors and agencies, the World Bank (WB), an autonomous agency of the UN, has become the largest funder of educational development. The WB explicitly states the importance of giving priority to

education in fighting against poverty, and its influential agenda has subsequently been supported and expanded by many other agencies (Tarabini 2010, p. 206–7). As leader of international efforts to eradicate global poverty, the WB actively promoted human capital theory from the 1960s and subsequently economic globalisation policies from the 1980s. Furthermore, Phillip Jones (2005) claims the WB has pursued neo-liberal reforms of education in the developed West while simultaneously ensuring “the conformity of international educational policy and practice to the demands and logic of global economic integration along capitalist lines” (Jones 2005, pp. 34–9).

One of globalisation’s main impacts on education has been financial-driven reforms that are intended to reduce government expenditure on education. These reforms are implemented by, for example, deregulating government schools; diverting public funding from higher to lower levels of education; expanding secondary education through privatisation; reducing public spending per pupil through increasing class sizes; and decreasing quality of education through ‘efficiency’ reforms, such as decentralisation (Carnoy 1998, p. 25). As an illustration of this, the World Bank (WB) is, as noted in the previous section, a major multilateral aid donor to Bangladesh. Beginning in the 1980s, the WB imposed conditions that were unrealistic and almost beyond the capacity of the Bangladeshi government to comply with. This was because the WB’s lending policies and conditions were based on neoliberal ideology, that is, on privatisation, liberalisation, and stabilisation, without accounting for local differences and constraints (Quibria and Islam 2015, p. 11). The ideology of neoliberalism, which insists on limited governance in a capitalist market, has been ruthlessly implemented worldwide by mainly compliant national

governments since the 1980s.

Steven Klees (2008) argues that neoliberal thinking in education resulted in failed policies, and that the World Bank's indirect support for user fees in education and the increasing privatisation of education has resulted in policies that ultimately "help the rich, not the poor" and that "the dominant ideology [of neoliberalism] leads to policies that help the advantaged accumulate ever more advantages and help maintain poverty, inequality and marginalization." He concludes that, overall, "very little of the neoliberal agenda has to do with the substance of education, and with what happens in the classroom" (Klees 2008, p. 336 – 339). The capitalist business practices facilitated by globalisation are also clearly evident in aid activities, as illustrated in the following.

### **Conditional Aid and Dependency**

Official development assistance (ODA) may not be what it seems to be because it is often 'tied' or conditional aid. Kendall (2009) posits that "the vast majority of international foreign aid funding returns directly to the 'donating' state." For example, large amounts of aid money must be used by recipient countries to buy donor products. In one instance, the Canadian International Development Agency gave money to a developing country to print and distribute textbooks in all government schools, but the printing had to be done by a Canadian publisher (Kendall 2009, p. 420).

In another case of 'tied' aid, Green and Curtis (2005) reports on frequent complaints in Bangladesh about aid donors withholding grants because agreed conditions have not been fulfilled, causing vital projects to be delayed. This

problem occurs mainly because the government, urgently wanting aid, signs finance agreements though unable to fulfil the donors' conditions. Aid problems in Bangladesh are further compounded by too many donors, each with their own purposes and procedures, causing complexity and potential for confusion (Green and Curtis 2005, p. 394). The foregoing examples show how conditional aid prioritises Western donors' capitalistic business agendas and simultaneously propagates Western values and beliefs through Third World students' learning materials.

Dependency theory blames capitalism for hindering development and impoverishing developing countries. It accuses Western nations of using educational aid to “infuse their own values and technologies into the development process” (Altbach 1985, p. 480), which perpetuates the domination of rich countries over poor ones in a cycle of continuing dependency and of intellectual bondage – a situation characterized by Altbach (1985, p. 469) as “servitude of the mind”. For example, developing countries remain dependent on Western-designed schools, curricula, textbooks, publishing, and information and communication technologies (ICT), if they are available. Consequently, dependency theory views educational aid as a means of enforcing dependence of poor countries on the rich industrialised West in an exploitative relationship that has continued unchanged since the colonial period when most of South Asia was ruled by the British Empire.

### **Aid Distribution Problems**

The international organization and provision of aid to developing countries is beset by fundamental problems, such as the growing fragmentation of aid

and a decline in the size of development projects that has accompanied the recent huge increase in the number of aid donors (Knuttsen & Lindberg 2012, p. 817). Concerning the proliferation in the number of ODA donors, Riddell (2007, p. 360) explains: “Each year, over 35,000 separate official aid transactions take place and, on average, each aid recipient has to deal with more than 25 official aid donors.” This situation places tremendous strains on local agencies in implementing and monitoring. Also, a lack of coordination between organisations at various levels of aid delivery can lead to duplication and at times there is conflict between aid efforts. Furthermore, such a problem is compounded by foreign consultants who often lack understanding of different national contexts (Riddell 2007, pp. 386).

Other related problems include aid not being provided in sufficient overall quantities to meet the different needs of poor countries, and the aid that is provided is not allocated in any systematic, rational, or efficient way to those who need it most. The aggregate amounts of aid provided to recipient countries are volatile and unpredictable, and the overall relationship between donors and recipients remains extremely lopsided with donors remaining almost wholly in control of aid disbursement (Riddell 2007, pp. 387). Also, there are many reported cases of aid waste, or aid found not to reach its intended destinations. For example, 11 per cent of aid has been used to finance military forces (Collier 2007, p. 103), and according to Heyneman and Lee (2016) there are many cases of educational aid being diverted. The authors allege that graft and corruption is widespread throughout the aid industry (Heyneman and Lee 2016, p. 6).

Another problem is inconsistency, where large and relatively wealthy countries are defined as ‘developing’ even though they are recipients of international aid. For example, India recently received US\$ 423 million in ODA, yet has sufficient resources to finance a nuclear arsenal, a large military, and is itself an aid donor to Africa and other places. Surely the question needs to be asked why India cannot finance its citizens’ educational requirements by reordering its spending priorities (Heyneman and Lee 2016, p. 6). Clearly, international development organisations and their policies need to be rationalised and reformed to minimize distribution problems and enable aid to be more efficiently delivered to those most in need. Also, educational aid needs to focus on access for everyone to quality education, which is considered next.

### **Access to Quality Education**

The SDG 4 goal to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education.” is an important priority in the South Asian context given the substantial gaps remaining, but also in view of the region’s “latent potential to emerge as the global knowledge hub, given its youth bulge” (UNESCAP 2016, p. 11). Investing in human development through comprehensive health care, quality education and vocational training for developing skills to provide equal opportunity to all, including women and vulnerable people, would enable South Asia to reap enormous benefits from its youthful population. Already, economists have calculated South Asia’s returns to education as being at 18.4 per cent compared with 16.4 per cent for the global average (UNESCAP 2016, p. 12), a figure that points to remarkable future prosperity in the region.

However, poverty, social caste, geographic location, gender, disabilities, and

other factors remain formidable barriers to education in South Asia. An estimated 36.4 million children aged 5–13 are out of school, and the most excluded of these children often face multiple barriers to education. For example, girls with disabilities living in rural Nepal have the lowest access to education in that country. Also, emergencies caused by wars and natural disasters (floods, cyclones, and earthquakes) take a toll on education. In Bangladesh, an estimated 1.5 million children missed out on education due to cyclones in 2007 and 2009, which caused severe damage to school buildings (UNICEF 2014, pp. 49–52). Nevertheless, substantial and innovative aid projects have been implemented to help improve access to education.

Bangladesh has a long history of non-formal education, mainly delivered by local NGOs. Responding to the huge numbers of out-of-school children, non-formal primary education now complements formal education, giving children the chance to learn basic literacy and numeracy, and to enroll or re-enroll at school. Around six million Bangladeshi children have benefitted from non-formal education in the last three decades. Meanwhile, in neighboring India, specialized schools for girls only have been established to attract out-of-school girls in rural areas. Called KGBVs, these single-sex lower secondary schools make education more accessible to girls from groups such as lower castes, minority tribes, and Muslim communities who would otherwise drop out of school after primary education level. There are currently around 200,000 girls enrolled in KGBVs in 27 Indian states (UNICEF 2014, pp. 54–56).

Schools as Zones of Peace (SZOP) is an initiative of UNICEF and a group of aid partners with the Government of Nepal. Begun in 2003 and finally endorsed

by the government in 2011, the SZOP initiative depends on strong community involvement to designate Nepali schools as neutral, peaceful zones where children can continue their education safely in times of conflict, without fear of occupation by police, soldiers or insurgents (UNICEF 2014, pp. 56–57). In May, 2015, two major earthquakes destroyed or heavily damaged schools in Nepal, preventing about 985,000 children from having classes. UNICEF and NGOs are working with the government to get all children back to school in temporary learning centres as soon as possible, so that no child is left out of school (UNICEF 2015).

There is strong evidence that education can reduce poverty, as indicated in the introductory remarks. However, Colclough (2012) argues that the interaction between poverty and education is very complex. Moreover, circumstances of poverty and education can combine to keep poor people in poverty rather than releasing them from it. He points to poverty having harmful affects on the quality and quantity of education, which ultimately reduces its income benefits (Colclough 2012, p. 145). In a similar vein, Abadzi (2004) warns against the notion of equating access to education with poverty alleviation (p. 280). Children from very poor families often suffer from malnutrition, developmental delays, and other health problems that interfere with their learning ability (p. 278). The issue of educational quality is also addressed by Brock-Utne (1995) who draws attention to the importance of developing curricula that is based on indigenous knowledge, local socialization systems, and relevant to the specific requirements and aspirations of the developing country. However achieving this is difficult because of strict conditions that prioritise cost, efficiency and effectiveness in the disbursement of aid for education (Brock-Utne 1995, p.

184).

Ultimately, the 2<sup>nd</sup> MDG's focus on universal primary education (UPE) and the raw expansion of primary school enrolments was counterproductive to the overall goal of releasing people from poverty. This was because the quality of instruction, learning, classrooms and equipment were sacrificed to the quantitative goal of UPE – a goal that was strongly supported by the international community of donors who prioritised their aid money to achieving it by 2015 (Jones 2008, p. 37). Clearly, educational quality now needs to be accorded greater importance than merely maximizing student enrolments to achieve the quantity-based target of UPE of the recently-expired MDG 2. To that end, the recent adoption of SDG 4 has shifted attention from access to education to providing quality education, which aspires to include marginalized and vulnerable people.

## **Conclusion**

The role of educational aid in poverty alleviation is complex, controversial and strongly contested, as shown in the foregoing. Though enormous progress has been achieved in reducing poverty in South Asia, the rural-urban divide remains wide in terms of MDG outcomes and deprivations. In providing educational aid to developing countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, the international community has been guided mainly by the MDGs, which ended in December 2015. In order to realise MDGs 1–7, the final goal MDG 8 (build a global partnership for development) required a united and cooperative effort by all players. However, the necessary cooperation was not always achieved. This was because of the prevailing unequal relationship between

donor agencies and recipient countries. As a result, development has been hindered and economic dependency continues.

Donors have often dominated the allocation of aid, and they have also frequently imposed conditions on its disbursement that are disadvantageous to recipient countries in an exploitative relationship that perpetuates poverty and colonialism. Educational aid and the aid-related targets of MDG 8 were prioritised towards achieving the quantitative target of universal primary education (UPE) in MDG 2. Consequently, this goal was achieved by massively expanding enrolments, but simultaneously there has been a measurable decline in educational quality, which in turn is counterproductive to the overall goal of alleviating poverty and promoting human development.

The recently implemented SDG 4 emphasizes quality learning in place of the expired quantitative target of UPE in MDG 2. This new focus on educational quality should not only include matters of instructors, curriculum, class sizes and equipment, but also consider the affects of poverty on very poor children's health and fitness for learning at school. The challenge now is for aid donors and recipients to cooperate more closely in order to continue increasing school enrolments, including for secondary and tertiary levels, but also to simultaneously improve the quality of education, making it more equitable, inclusive, and culturally appropriate to the needs and aspirations of the people of South Asia.

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