

---

## Something is Seriously Wrong with the Education of Poor Countries: Brief, General and Theoretical Account

---

Gashaw Abate

The formal institutional mechanism for developing human skills and knowledge is the formal educational system. Some believe or want to believe that it is the rapid quantitative expansion of educational opportunities which holds the basic key to national development. The more education, the more rapid the anticipated development. All countries had committed themselves, therefore, to the goal of universal primary education in the shortest possible time. This quest has become a politically sensitive but often economically costly "sacred cow". Until recently few politicians, statesmen, economists or educational planners inside or outside the third world would have dared publicly to challenge the cult of formal education.

Nevertheless, the challenge is gathering momentum and it comes from many sources. It can be found most clearly in the character and results of the development process itself. After rapidly expanding enrollements and hundreds of billions of dollars of educational expenditure, the plight of average citizen of many countries seems little improved. Absolute poverty is chronic and pervasive. Economic disparities between the rich and the poor widen with every passing year. Unemployment and under employment have reached staggering proportions, with the educated increasingly joining the ranks of those without jobs.

Earlier, it was claimed that quantitative expansion of educational opportunities would

accelerate economic growth; would raise levels of living especially of the poor, would generate widespread and equal employment opportunities; would acculturate diverse ethnic or tribal groups; and would encourage modern attitudes. It has been shown that such claims are greatly exaggerated and in many instances simply false.

Practice shows that the expansion of formal schooling is equated with the spread of learning. The students' and teachers' exclusive concern becomes the acquisition of school certificates and higher degrees but not improved ability to undertake productive work. Education became almost entirely oriented towards preparation for work in the urban modern sectors thereby distorting the students aspirations. And too much investment in formal schooling, especially at secondary and higher levels, divert scarce resources from more socially productive activities (e.g. direct or self employment) and thus be a drag rather than a stimulus to national development.

The education of poor nations imparts values, ideas, attitudes and aspirations which may or may not be in the nations's best developmental interest. Education absorbs the greatest share of recurrent government expenditures, occupies the time and activities of the greatest number of adults and children, and carries the greatest psychological burden of development aspirations.



---

## Something is Seriously Wrong with the Education of Poor Countries: Brief, General and Theoretical Account

---

Gashaw Abate

The formal institutional mechanism for developing human skills and knowledge is the formal educational system. Some believe or want to believe that it is the rapid quantitative expansion of educational opportunities which holds the basic key to national development. The more education, the more rapid the anticipated development. All countries had committed themselves, therefore, to the goal of universal primary education in the shortest possible time. This quest has become a politically sensitive but often economically costly "sacred cow". Until recently few politicians, statesmen, economists or educational planners inside or outside the third world would have dared publicly to challenge the cult of formal education.

Nevertheless, the challenge is gathering momentum and it comes from many sources. It can be found most clearly in the character and results of the development process itself. After rapidly expanding enrollements and hundreds of billions of dollars of educational expenditure, the plight of average citizen of many countries seems little improved. Absolute poverty is chronic and pervasive. Economic disparities between the rich and the poor widen with every passing year. Unemployment and under employment have reached staggering proportions, with the educated increasingly joining the ranks of those without jobs.

Earlier, it was claimed that quantitative expansion of educational opportunities would

accelerate economic growth; would raise levels of living especially of the poor, would generate widespread and equal employment opportunities; would acculturate diverse ethnic or tribal groups; and would encourage modern attitudes. It has been shown that such claims are greatly exaggerated and in many instances simply false.

Practice shows that the expansion of formal schooling is equated with the spread of learning. The students' and teachers' exclusive concern becomes the acquisition of school certificates and higher degrees but not improved ability to undertake productive work. Education became almost entirely oriented towards preparation for work in the urban modern sectors thereby distorting the students aspirations. And too much investment in formal schooling, especially at secondary and higher levels, divert scarce resources from more socially productive activities (e.g. direct or self employment) and thus be a drag rather than a stimulus to national development.

The education of poor nations imparts values, ideas, attitudes and aspirations which may or may not be in the nations's best developmental interest. Education absorbs the greatest share of recurrent government expenditures, occupies the time and activities of the greatest number of adults and children, and carries the greatest psychological burden of development aspirations.



There are less quantifiable problems of education broadly referred to as the inefficiencies and inertia of educational systems.

One might start with the outdated content and dubious quality of education at all levels. "The learning techniques... remain the same: the rote method, the technique of cramming, and once the examination menace is over, forgetting all these futile impedimenta. The examination system is not an evaluation of a student's personality and intellectual equipment, his powers of thinking for himself, reflection and reasoning. It is a challenge to resourceful deception and display of superficial cleverness... looked at as a business enterprise, the school and college present a woebegone spectacle. We find in education antediluvian technology which would not survive for an instant in any other economic sector. The teaching methods and learning techniques... are rusty, cranky and antiquated."

Deficiencies of learning methods and curricula are closely related to inadequate, competence and motivations of most teachers who are underpaid and without incentive or opportunity to learn any more themselves than they took in at their start.

The situation is hardly better among educational administrators. Rigidity persists along with a lack of required information of the society's needs, conditions and developmental possibilities. There is a lack of practically oriented research, experimentation and evaluation. Such problems arise in part when socially perceived needs within the educational system vastly exceed available funds and resources outside the educational system. It is in part due to the fact that what society and individuals want of education are often impossible dreams, demands frequently out of line with priorities of national

development, indeed, often running against those priorities.

Sometimes there are political interference in the educational system and distortion of its governing policies. Political pressures intrude at all levels of education, forcing the system to respond. But such pressures may have little to do with primary goals of national development or with the changing needs of the society as a whole.

Primary schools spend very little time giving students the knowledge, skills, and new ideas necessary to work efficiently in their (rural) environment (e.g. farming practices and management, hygiene, nutrition, community development, etc.)

Primary schools typically attempt to prepare students for secondary schools with training in literacy, numeracy and foreign language, receiving the highest priority. The training usually consists of recitation, repetition and drill - learning rather than thinking and problem solving.

For a variety of economic and social reasons, a good number of children who enter primary school drop out after the first year, with increasing in the following years. Estimates show that less than 50 % of those who enter the grade one are likely to stay four years, and an insignificant number of them are likely to succeed in joining secondary schools even though a few of the first entrants might complete the primary cycle. Of those who do get to secondary school, only a few will make it to join the university. For those who stay right throughout the secondary school, but do not obtain a place in the university, the probability of finding jobs in the modern sectors (towards



which their secondary education has been geared) is estimated to be inconsiderable.

Clearly something is seriously wrong with the educational system modeled upon other societies and transferred to an environment to which it has little relevance if any.

#### References

Arnold Anderson and Mary Jean Bowman, 1966; (eds) **Education and Economic Development**, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Aldine Publishing company, USA.

Don Adams and Robert M. Bjork, 1975; **Education in Developing Areas**, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, by David McKay company. Inc., New York.

T.L. Maliyamkono, A.G.M Ishumi and S.J. Weels, 1982; **Higher Education and Development in Eastern Africa**, UK.

Gerald M. Meier, 1989; **Leading Issues in Economic Development**, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Oxford University Press, New York.

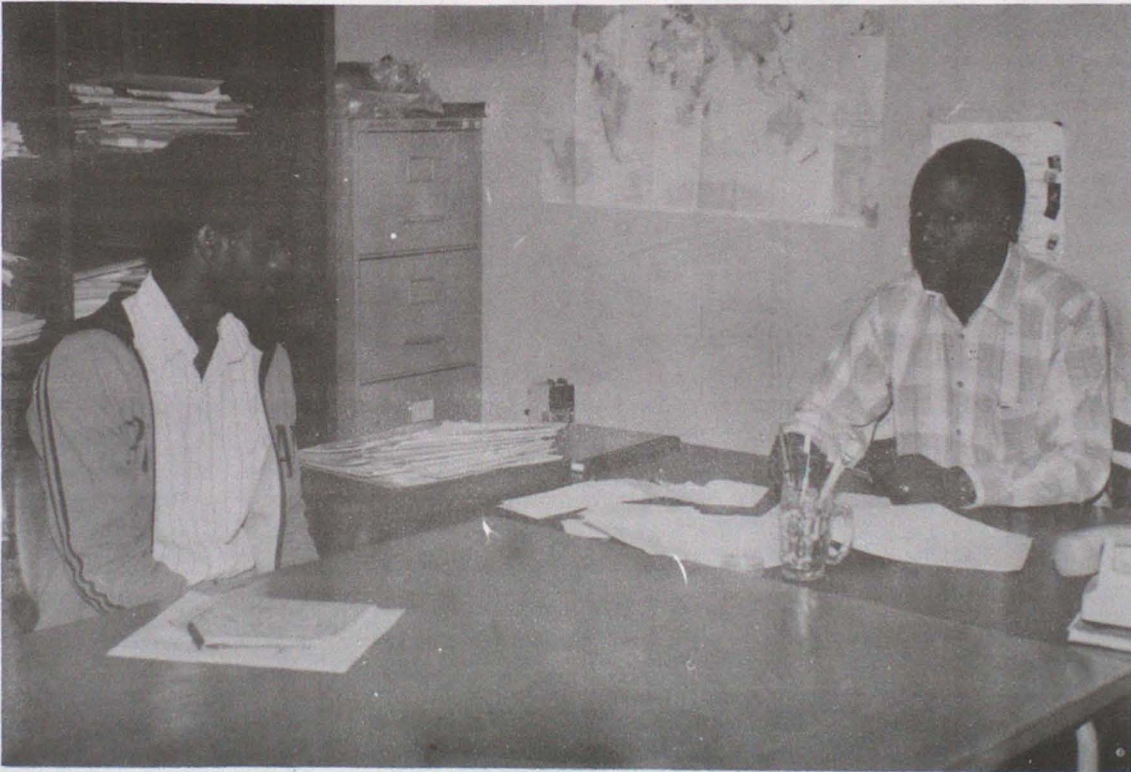


## FACTS AND FIGURES

### SPSUS AT IER

Special Professional Support for University Students (SPSUS) has become a strong regular program of IER. A number of students who find it difficult to cope with the socio-social and educational environment of the University increasingly come to the Institute to get counselling services. Professionals both Ethiopian nationals and from the International community are actively participating in the program.

So far, many students from Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Science, Faculty of Business and Economics, College of Social Sciences, Institute of Language Studies and from Faculty of Education received appropriate professional support by SPSUS program



**Dr Menelik Desta, Psychiatrist (Right) attentively listening to what his client is saying.**