

Else Oyen, professor  
Centre for International Poverty Research  
University of Bergen, Norway  
else.oyen@sif.uib.no  
www.crop.org

SIU konferanse Solstrand 6.-7. October 2003

### *Strategies for poverty reduction*

Higher education has a value of its own. When linked to the issue of poverty reduction it is necessary to ask another set of questions, including the crucial one whether higher education in general is the best tool for poverty reduction.

One set of questions concerns the relationship between primary education and higher education. Given limited resources to education it will often be necessary to prioritise between primary education and higher education. As a poverty reducing strategy there is little doubt that more poor children can be enrolled in primary education than in higher education, partly because the threshold for enrolment is lower, partly because primary schools can be decentralised, and partly because primary education is less costly and as such can accommodate more poor children. Limited access to primary education will in turn create limited access to higher education. It can of course be argued that education of teachers depends on higher education, but here we are talking about higher education in general.

Another set of issues concerns the shaping of the future of a society through education. Here primary education and higher education have different roles to play. Higher education, in spite of all the positive things we can say about it, will, if given priority on behalf of primary education, contribute to more inequality in a society that is already unequal. Only the elite and the upper middle class will be able to afford to send their children into higher education, even if such education is in principle free. And as we know, higher education is an instrument to more influence and power over the use of public resources and institution building.

Universal primary education on the other hand is more likely to contribute to equality in the sense that all children are given a better base for further advancement. Let me refer here to a paper by an Indian professor in economics, André Beteille, who for twenty years has written on education, inequality and universality. Poverty can not be beaten through higher education only. Mr. Skogmo talks about "higher education is important for building capacity to make government more effective, improve the delivery of social services to the public and enhance economic development" (p.3). Yes, that is likely true. But what does it do to poor uneducated people who are rightly sceptical to government officials, legal institutions and public servants, and even directly afraid of their power to harm poor citizens. This scepticism and fear of poor people is heavily documented by the World Bank studies, and seems to be a worldwide phenomenon. The crucial question is: how can higher education which is often tailored to western ideas of higher education, be designed and constructed in such a way that it overcomes the scepticism and fear of poor people and contributes directly to poverty reduction?

The Norwegian Action Plan is good, and may I add without being too chauvinistic, it is among the best I have seen so far. It stresses "a vision for improving the lives of the poorest". Also in education. But the Plan does not address the issues raised above. On the contrary, it muddles the arguments through promoting all kinds of education without sorting out different kinds of analyses, conditions and consequences for different kinds of educational systems.

Many academic institutions in the South offering higher education are in sad state, as stressed in both Mr. Skogmo's and Dr. Ramphela's presentations. Professors and teachers work within an inadequate infrastructure, to say it politely, and their salaries are such that they have to take other jobs besides their job at the teaching institution. Research is a luxury that comes only to the few, and updating of knowledge is a constant challenge to be overcome. In the midst of all this, multi-national and national donors as well as NGOs add to the misery by pulling experts out of their academic environment and turn them into relatively well-paid consultants. For most academics in the South this is a tempting opportunity. Donors and NGOs are in constant need of qualified endogenous expertise. Actually, this is part of their ideology about partnership and involving local people. So they pay well – and pull the good academics out of the universities. That is also poverty production, although of a different kind. Over time the expertise of those academics deteriorate. One consultation report on poverty after the other builds on previous reports, no time is available for the acquisition of new knowledge, and the quality of the knowledge brought back to the donors diminishes rapidly. As a result the teaching institutions and the higher education suffer. And even worse, interventions for poor people based on such reports increase the suffering of poor people. One can well identify another poverty producing process in the midst of benevolence.

These are the comments I made before coming to this conference. Let me add some ad hoc comments based on the two previous speakers' presentations.

Dr. Ramphela together with Professor Francis Wilson of the University of Cape Town made an early and inventive study of the living conditions of poor people in South Africa (the Carnegie study) when poverty among poor people was not even considered in the statistics on poverty in South Africa. In her presentation here she has mainly concentrated on poor countries and made the implicit assumption that helping poor countries will help reduce poverty. I am arguing elsewhere that aid to poor countries does not necessarily result in a reduction of poverty among poor people and that the two concepts need to be kept analytically apart. This analysis is relevant also for education on different levels. The unfortunate mixture of concepts is seen in much of the World Bank literature on poverty. My challenge to Dr. Ramphela is to bring this issue back to the World Bank and invite the Bank to consider such conceptual clarifications and their policy implications.

Mr. Skogmo stressed the need for streamlining development aid. He gave as examples the ongoing co-operation between the OECD countries and the World Bank and the need to unite donor forces to combat poverty and avoid overlapping of interventions. On the one hand it can be argued that when the richest countries join forces it will provide an extremely powerful coalition in the fight against poverty, if they have the right solution. On the other hand, it is necessary to look also at a scenario where their unified solution may not be right or adequate. Dominant theories of development are being

**questioned, and have been so for quite a while now. The tendency to prefer systems of education developed in the North and apply them to the South is likewise being questioned. Both modes of aid is still prevail.**

**We shall be wise if we follow the advice of dr. Ramphele and listen to experts in the teaching institutions in the South, provided they do not forget the poorest part of the population in their advice to the mighty donors of the North.**