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## Aid, education policy, and development

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WIDER Working Paper 2015/135

## **Aid, education policy, and development**

Miguel Niño-Zarazúa \*

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the recent history of education aid policy. It highlights an important shift in policy thinking in the international aid architecture that has dominated the global education aid agenda since the early 1990s. It argues that Rawlsian principles of social justice, human rights perspectives, and advancements in economic theory that emphasize the role of human capital in development have been central in that process.

**Keywords:** aid, education policy, developing countries, Sustainable Development Goals

**JEL classification:** I25, I28, F35, O57

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## 1 Introduction

The normative principles, institutional structures, and legal systems that facilitate the provision and utilization of education services—what constitute education policy—have long been recognized as instrumentally important for human capital formation, and individual agency (Schultz 1960). A sound education policy that facilitates the advancement of knowledge and the process of technological and scientific innovation is essential for economic growth and the development process of nations (Barro 1991; Rebelo 1991; Benhabib and Spiegel 1994; Barro and Sala-i-Martin 1998).

A crucial part of a successful development strategy largely depends on how effectively a country utilizes its abundant resources or ‘factor endowments’ for production and exchange in the global economy. For developing countries in particular, which often exhibit higher birth rates and family-oriented social and economic structures, human resources represent a very important factor endowment for production. However, it is not until they are upgraded through human capital investment, that they can more effectively support the development process (Haq 1996; Lin 2008). It is here where the design of effective education policies becomes critical.

Developing countries face; however, major challenges. These include, inter alia, considerable budgetary constraints in contexts of large unserved (or underserved) populations; weak bureaucratic capacity to manage programmes and policies; limited capacity to provide good quality services; competing needs and interests in pursuing education policy vis-à-vis other policy priorities; and social norms and economic incentives that prevent the full utilization of education services. In such contexts, aid to education can be justified under economic principles, given the instrumental role that education plays in widening people’s opportunities and breaking the structural causes of poverty (Barham et al. 1995), and also as a fundamental human rights (United Nations 1993).

Since the World Declaration on Education for All, adopted by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and other multi-laterals, as well as by 155 countries and 150 governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), much work has been undertaken to improve the effectiveness of aid to education (UNESCO 2007). Greater engagement among multi- and bi-lateral organizations in adopting broader educational frameworks has contributed to a shift in the focus from vertical and supply-driven strategies towards the inclusion of demand-related considerations, vertical and horizontal inequalities, and relationships with external actors, including the private sector and NGOs. These processes paved the way for the adoption of the Dakar Framework for Action that reaffirmed the commitments of the international community to achieving Education for All by the year 2015 (UNESCO 2000), and also the introduction of global initiatives, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), in particular Goal 2, to achieve universal primary education.

These global initiatives changed the structure and composition of aid to education. Over the past 15 years, aid to education, in particular higher education but also primary education, has increased steadily. Donors and actors participating in the sector have also increased. More actors and larger aid budgets have, however, created costs for recipient countries. Issues of lack of harmonization and alignment of donors with domestic policy priorities have dominated the discussions around aid effectiveness, first captured in the Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness in 2005, and then reaffirmed in the 2008 Accra Agenda for Action that aimed to accelerate progress towards

ownership, harmonization, alignment, results, and mutual accountability (OECD 2008; Wood et al. 2011).

Now, at the outset of the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and more specifically, Goal 4—ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all—a more complex set of policy strategies will be needed to achieve the much more ambitious targets of SDG4 by 2030. How could donors better engage with developing country governments? How can education aid more effectively help shape domestic policies to improve education quality (and achieve the SDGs)? These are key questions for the future post-2015 education agenda.

This paper provides a discussion on the recent history of education aid policy. Despite that developing countries have increased their domestic revenue capacity to finance education spending, aid still contributes, on average, to one-fifth of the education budgets in low-income countries. In some African countries, including Mali, Rwanda, and Zambia, the contribution of aid to government education budgets goes up to nearly 50 per cent (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2011).

The debate on the role of education in economic and social development, and on the links between education and the other sustainable development goals is intense within donor agencies and, not least, within developing country governments and civil society.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents an overview of the recent trends of education aid, paying particular attention to a fundamental transition that began in the 1990s, and which moved aid policies and philosophies from a ‘productivist’ approach, which emphasized support to physical infrastructure to foster economic growth, to a more ‘developmentalist’ perspective of development that gave a stronger emphasis to investing in human capital. Sub-Section 2.1 presents an overview of the studies that examine some important shifts in education aid policy thinking, which recognize the importance of adopting the Paris-style aid modalities, and the need to focus on education quality and learning. Section 3 concludes with some reflections on future global education agenda.

## **2 Education policy and policy approaches in international aid architecture**

Since the post-war era, there have been important shifts in the provision of aid to support education policy.<sup>1</sup> Infrastructure and the ‘hard’ sectors were favoured by donors in the earlier decades, and the ‘softer’ sectors, in particular education and health became only dominant until the 1990s and first decade of this century. During the 1960s, education aid constituted only eight per cent of total aid flows, increasing marginally to around 11 per cent during the 1970s. The priority given to education was again reduced from the late 1970s through 1980s, something that reflected, as Coombs (1985) points out, the joint view of donor agencies and developing country authorities that important competing priorities in physical infrastructure and labour productivity needed to be addressed to improve the competitiveness of developing countries.

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<sup>1</sup> We adopt a definition of education policy that considers the principles of policy strategies and rules that facilitate the development of education systems as defined in Bell and Stevenson (2006).

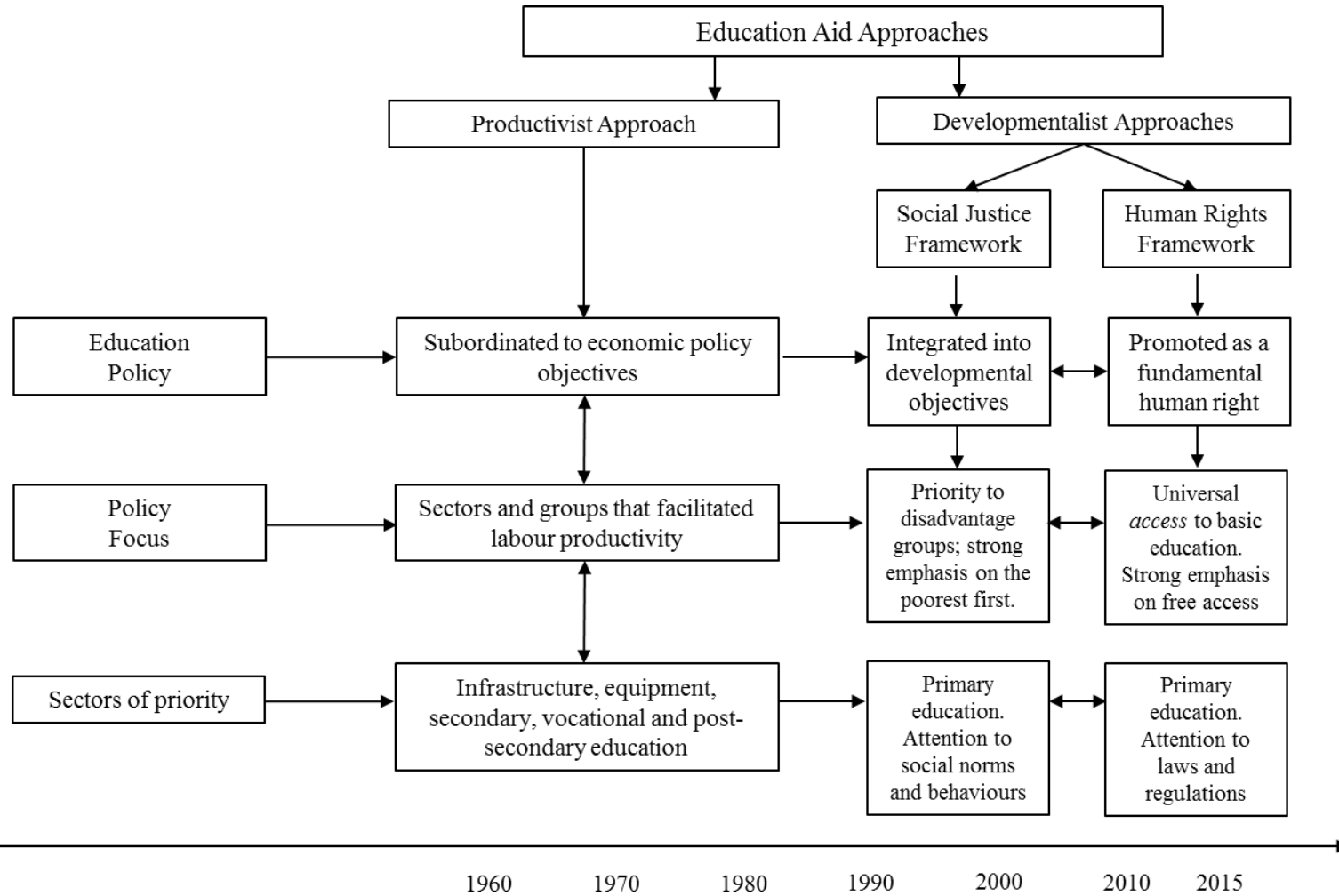
Two central features characterized what I refer to as the productivist approach to education aid during the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. First, education aid was largely concentrated on building physical infrastructure, and providing equipment and technical assistance to developing countries, many of which had recently gained independence from colonial rule.<sup>2</sup> Tilak (1988) shows that two-thirds of World Bank educational lending during the 1970s was directed to the construction of schools and around 30 per cent was used to purchase equipment. Aid efforts concentrated in strengthening the supply-side capabilities of countries to enhance labour productivity, and economic growth. These activities included the support of workforce development plans, which emphasized vocational training, and engineering education (Heyneman 2004).

The second feature of the productivist approach was its strong focus on secondary and post-secondary education, including vocational training (World Bank 1980). In fact, nearly 50 per cent of bi-lateral aid went to secondary and nearly one-third to tertiary and technical education (OECD 2012). Reiff (1983) also points out that training programmes for teachers, and learning materials were largely supported by the World Bank in the 1970s, while basic education absorbed only five per cent of its education budget.

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<sup>2</sup> To illustrate, just in Africa, Cameroon, Togo, Madagascar, Democratic Republic of Congo, Benin, Niger, Burkina Faso, Côte D'Ivoire, Chad, Central Africa Republic, Gabon, Senegal, Mali, Nigeria, Mauritania, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, Algeria, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, Gambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Swaziland, and Equatorial Guinea gained independence in the 1960s.

Figure 1: Education aid approaches and their characteristics



Source: Author's illustration.

Insufficient attention was given to incentives, social norms, and other demand-related factors, that affect the utilization of education services. It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that a developmentalist approach to education aid began to dominate the global education agenda. This approach has been characterized by a more multidimensional perspective to education—and development more broadly—placing strong emphasis on the structural factors that impede the optimal utilization of education services (see Figure 1).

It is important to highlight two distinctive, although interrelated, frameworks within the developmentalist approach.

The first framework has been dominant among the United Nations agencies, and based on principles that underpin Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which highlights the right of everyone to have free access to ‘elementary education’ (United Nations 1948). The human rights framework became more prominent since the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action of 1993 and the subsequent efforts in the late 1990s and early 2000s to mainstream human rights into the work of the United Nations and bi-lateral organizations involved in the promotion and delivery of education policies and services (United Nations Development Group 2003).

The central principle underpinning this framework has been that access to education is a universal entitlement that governments are bound to fulfil regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. External support from donor agencies and NGOs would be justifiable in contexts where governments have limited financial and administrative capacity (or no political will) to fulfil their obligations. This framework has implicitly adopted normative egalitarian principles that promote global efforts to reduce gender gaps, discriminatory laws, and regulations that prevail in education systems, without having an explicit poverty focus (Buchanan 2005).

The second framework has strong foundations on Rawlsian principles of social justice, which suggest that the marginal utility from additional units of aid money would yield larger welfare enhancing outcomes if they focus on the poorest (Rawls 1985).<sup>3</sup> Prioritarians also argue that priority should be given to help the worst off because an improvement in their wellbeing as a result of policy has greater [ethical] value among societies with a shared sense of justice (Parfit 1991, 1997).

Social justice principles have been further enhanced by at least two empirical observations. First, in situations of budgetary constraints and fragmented credit and insurance markets, the ability of the poor to invest in education is limited, leading to low productivity, low incomes, and in extreme situations, ‘poverty traps’ that are difficult to break in the absence of public policies (Zimmerman and Carter 2003; Carter and Barrett 2006). Demand-related factors associated with individual behaviour and discriminatory norms that prevent optimal utilization of education services are also important considerations under this framework (Masino and Niño-Zarazúa 2016). Accordingly, donor agencies would be expected to aim their policies more towards the poorest and most vulnerable via targeting mechanisms, incentives, improved knowledge, and information.

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<sup>3</sup> Of particular relevance for the discussion is the Difference Principle, which Rawls arranged at the end of a ‘lexical priority’ order, after the Liberty Principle, and the Fair Equality of Opportunity Principle. A Pareto optimal (and just) choice under the Difference Principle would favour worst-off over the better-off.



Rigorous impact monitoring and evaluation systems of targeted interventions, what it is often referred to as the ‘evidence-based agenda’, have thus become prominent in the planning of donor activities—not only to assess how effective education aid policies are in contexts of scarce resources, and fine-tuning their features and mechanisms, but also to justify spending and gain political support from constituencies in donor countries. Rigorous impact evaluations remain a challenge for donors and recipient countries because first, impacts of education policy can take many years to materialize and second, because evaluation data from developing countries is short, incomplete, and often of poor quality. There have been; however, promising developments.

A recent report by the Leadership Council of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (2015), shows that since the mid-2000s, more than 60 developing countries have begun to collect data on student learning and achievement through various initiatives including, *inter alia*, Monitoring of Learning Achievement (MLA); Program on the Assessment of Student Achievement (PASA), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SAQMEQ). Important challenges remain though in terms of expanding coverage of countries, and harmonizing the standards of measurement to monitor progress of SDG4.

The second observation was related to emerging analytical models that assessed educational outcomes and calculated the economic rates of return on education investment. They found that primary education exhibited the highest economic returns, with average rates of returns to an additional year of schooling in the order of 10 per cent, particularly among developing countries (Psacharopoulos 1983; Psacharopoulos et al. 1986).<sup>4</sup> These studies were very influential and supported subsequent calls to shift public and donor funding from higher, tertiary and secondary education to primary education, which eventually culminated in the World Declaration on Education for All, adopted by UNESCO and other multi-laterals in 1990, and the subsequent formulation of MDG2. The focus on universal access to primary education became since then the dominant paradigm of education aid (Heyneman 2009, 2010; and also Heyneman and Lee 2016).

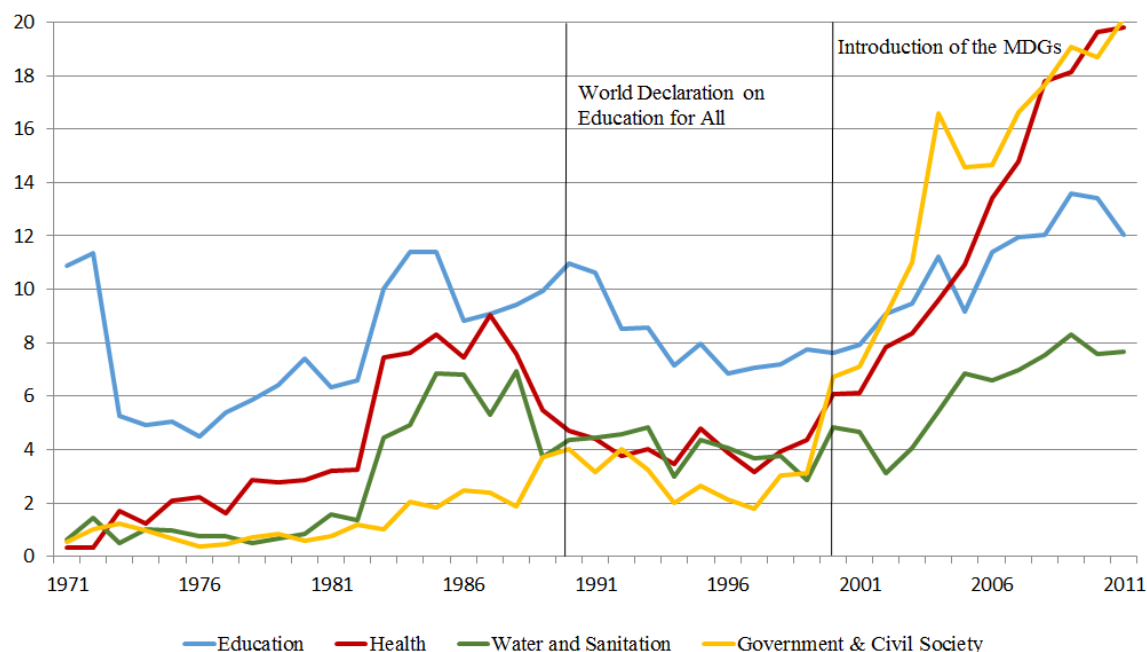
Thus, social justice theory, human rights perspectives, and advancements in economic theory that emphasizes the role of human capital in economic growth and development, have been central in understanding the shift in policy thinking in the aid architecture, and in education aid policies more specifically over the past 25 years.

This can be illustrated by the observed changes in the composition of aid allocations. First, aid contributions to the social sectors rose considerably from just above five per cent of total aid flows in the late 1960s to around 40 per cent in 2011. In real terms, aid to social services increased from an average of USD2 billion a year in the 1960s to USD50 billion in the 2000s, up to USD64 billion in 2011 (Addison et al. 2015). The education sector was until the late 1990s, dominant among the social sectors, absorbing, on average, 60 and 40 per cent of social sector aid budgets during the 1970s and 1980s, respectively. In the 1990s and especially after the introduction of the MDGs in 2000, the increasing focus on healthcare and the support of government and civil society institutions, meant that the share of education aid became less prominent, despite the fact that in real terms, aid flows to education continued at a steady increase, from an average of USD7 billion in the 1970s to USD8 billion in the 1990s, and then up to USD11 billion in the 2000s (see Figure 2).

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<sup>4</sup> This finding was later supported by Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2004).

Figure 2: Official development assistance to education (and other social sectors)



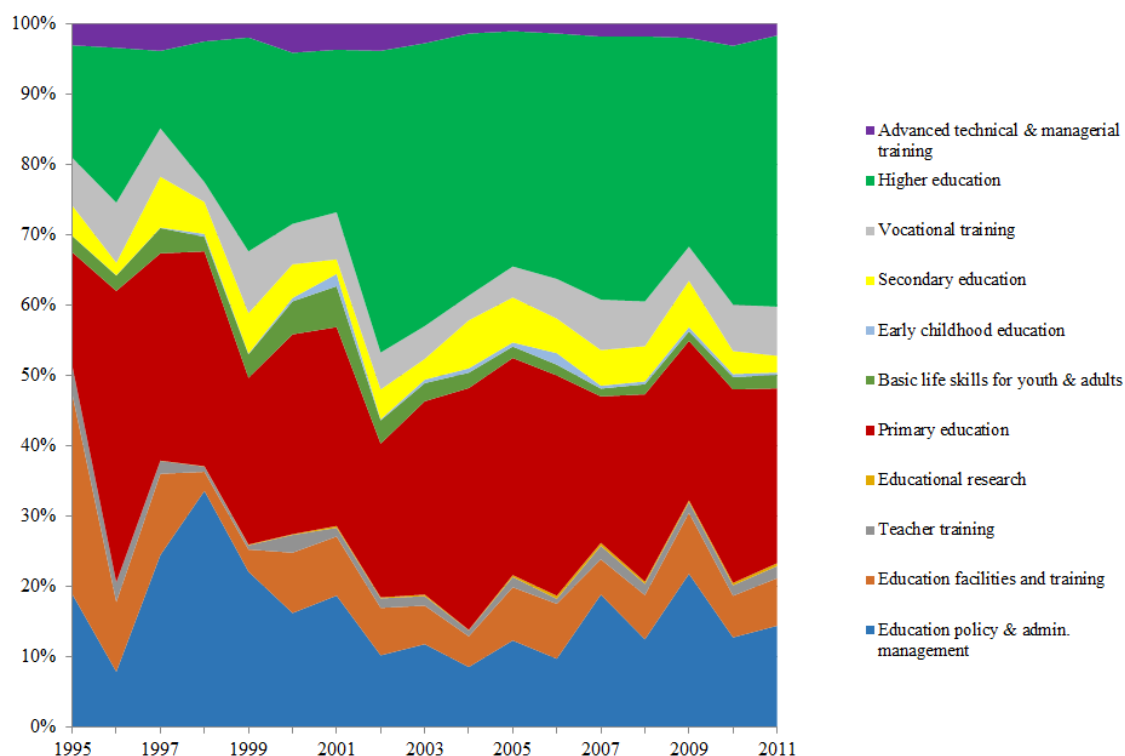
Note: Figures in billions USD at constant prices of 2010.

Source: Author's illustration, based on OECD (2012).

It is important to point out that despite the dominant rhetoric on universal access to primary education; higher education became the largest recipient of aid since the 2000s. To illustrate, in the 1990s, primary and higher education received on average about one-third and one-fifth of education aid budgets, something in the order of USD1 billion and USD0.7 billion, respectively. Activities associated with the strengthening of supply-side capabilities of education systems, including support for education policy and administration management, education facilities and teacher training were the most supported activities by donor agencies.

By the 2000s, higher education and post-secondary technical and managerial training had become the main beneficiary sectors, absorbing, on average, about 37 per cent of education aid budgets, nearly USD3.4 billion vis-à-vis 30 per cent allocated to primary and pre-school education, including adult literacy initiatives, which was in the order of USD2.6 billion. This is partly explained by the higher unit cost per student in higher education vis-à-vis in primary education. Secondary and vocational education remained largely relegated from donors' priorities, taking up only 10 per cent of education aid budgets, on average something in the order of USD1 billion (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Official development assistance to education by type of activity



Source: Author's illustration, based on OECD (2012).

There is little doubt that global development efforts have contributed to the significant progress towards achieving the goal of universal primary education. Primary school enrolment rates have improved in every single region of the world since 1990. In the developing world in particular, it increased on average from 80 per cent in 1990 to 90 per cent in 2012. In sub-Saharan Africa, the world region with lowest primary school enrolment rates, figures considerably improved, from 52 to 78 per cent in the same period. Girls have benefited greatly from this process. The gender gap in primary school enrolment has nearly disappeared in all regions (United Nations 2014).

The overall positive impact of education aid has been largely driven by the activities that aim to improve primary enrolment, which was at the heart of the MDGs. There is also evidence of complementary and reinforcing effects between aid for primary and secondary education, which seems to suggest that better access to, and quality of, secondary education, and the expectations that this may generate, induces children and their parents to complete primary school (Birchler and Michaelowa 2016). In the context of the new SDG4, which has the explicit and broader target (4.1), it aims to ensure equal access to quality primary and secondary education (United Nations 2015).

The steady increase in aid budgets to the education sector, particularly primary and higher education, has been accompanied by a proliferation of non-traditional (OECD-DAC) donor countries (e.g., Brazil, Chile, China, India, Mexico, Qatar Russia, and South Africa) and also new actors, including NGOs and global initiatives such as the Global Partnership for Education that provide financial resources, technical assistance, and deliver educational services in deprived communities. These new actors are increasingly playing an important role in development cooperation, and often compete with traditional donors to influence domestic policies.

## 2.1 Shifts in education aid policy-thinking

The new SDGs have signalled at least two important shifts in policy thinking in the area of education.

The first shift is related to a growing recognition on the parts of donor agencies and global actors about the importance to move away from project aid approaches, with their singular objectives and short-term time-window of intervention towards programme-based approaches including sector-wide and budget support, which are more consistent with the interconnectedness of the goals and targets of the SDGs. There is also a consensus about the importance of aligning donor policies and strategies with the principles of the Paris Declaration despite the fact that in practice project aid remains the preferred modality to channel aid in the sector.<sup>5</sup>

Riddell and Niño-Zarazúa (2016) point out that by focusing so actively on project aid, donors are undermining, unwittingly, the education systems that they seek to improve and develop in the first place. There are, however, important technical and political economy considerations that explain the dominance of project aid, and which highlight the challenges to fulfil the Paris principles of aid effectiveness and the targets of the SDG 17—revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

From a technical point of view, donors have often favoured projects because they can directly control their design, and closely monitor their performance. Issues of governance, accountability, and administrative capacity have featured prominently in the discussions about donor contributions to education systems through sector-wide approaches (SWAps), and budget support, especially in contexts characterized by state fragility, widespread poverty, endemic corruption, and weak institutions (Bourguignon and Sundberg 2007). Under such environments, project aid is likely to continue to dominate donor engagement, at least in the short and medium term.<sup>6</sup>

SWAps and budget support are clearly desirable in countries with reasonably well functioning states, because they provide opportunities for institutional building. The corollary is, however, that donors lose control over how ‘their money’ is spent, and how much they have achieved; something that complicates support from constituencies in donor countries, particularly in times of economic crisis. This is in fact an important political economy factor that explains donor behaviour. There are political incentives to produce tangible short-term results, e.g., building schools, increasing school enrolment, and distributing school materials, vis-à-vis investing in activities that improve education quality, which are more complex to achieve, and take much longer to materialize (Riddell and Niño-Zarazúa 2016).

Political incentives also concatenate with foreign policy, national security priorities, and international trade objectives in donor countries, which further complicate aid effectiveness (Heyneman and Lee 2016). In recipient countries, which are often characterized by imperfect competitive democratic political systems, discretionary donor objectives can unwittingly instigate political business cycles in detriment of democracy-enhancing processes (Chiripanhura and Niño-Zarazúa 2015). A major challenge for the future of education aid will be to find ways to

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, in 2011, more than two-thirds of aid disbursements went to projects.

<sup>6</sup> It is estimated that 50 per cent of the nearly 60 million primary school age children out of school lived in fragile states and conflict-affected areas (United Nations 2014).

reconcile donor countries' and recipient governments' discretionary objectives with the priorities set by the SDGs.

The second shift in policy thinking came at the recognition of the narrow focus of the MDG 2, and the need to move beyond increasing access to primary school, towards improving education quality and student learning. This is not surprising. A recent UNESCO study found that nearly 250 million children in developing countries were functionally illiterate and innumerate despite spending at least four years in the classroom (UNESCO 2014).

This is a very worrying finding; given the fact that student learning is critical for growth and the development process of nations (Hanushek and Woessmann 2012). Birchler and Michaelowa (2016) point out that although aid has been relevant for school enrolment—they report a 0.06 percentage increase in the growth rate of primary enrolment as the result of a 1 per cent increase in education aid—it has been much less so for improving school achievement.

So what could donor agencies do to support the improvement of education quality in developing countries? This is a far more complex question to answer that requires tailoring the analysis to specific contexts. There is, however, emerging evidence that provide hints for policy design and public action.

Masino and Niño-Zarazúa (2016) undertake a systematic review of the literature to identify education policies that are found to improve education quality and student learning in the context of developing countries. They find that education policies are more effective at improving student learning when discriminatory social norms and individual behaviours are factored into the design of education policies, both at the community and national levels. For instance, conditional cash transfers are found to be more effective than unconditional cash transfers in encouraging school attendance. School and teacher incentive programmes have also proved successful in some contexts although under very specific conditions.

Jones (2016) looks at how class composition affects student learning in the context of Uganda, a country often praised as a model for aid effectiveness, despite that classroom overcrowding is considered a source of poor learning outcomes in the country. Based on a large dataset of more than 250,000 Ugandan children from all districts of the country, he finds that pedagogical policies targeted at underperforming pupils are warranted to improve student learning, and that reducing class size or rearranging pupils by levels of achievement, a common policy favoured by many governments, is unlikely to contribute to improved education quality in developing countries.

The findings of these two studies are important as they highlight the limitations of supply-side interventions that often operate through the provision of physical and human resources, learning materials, and which dominated education aid efforts in the past decades.

At the heart of future development efforts to improve student learning is the issue of hunger and malnutrition.<sup>7</sup> Micronutrient deficiencies and hunger are of particular concern during early childhood and primary school years, as they can impair cognitive development, attention, and learning, and also impact negatively the future productivity and earnings of affected children (Scrimshaw 1998; Alderman et al. 2006; Walker et al. 2007; Victora et al. 2008).

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<sup>7</sup> Malnutrition reflects micronutrient deficiencies due to inappropriate combination (or excess) of food intake. In contrast, hunger and undernutrition arise from inadequate intake of dietary energy (Shetty 2003).

School and preschool-feeding programmes have been introduced in some contexts to tackle these problems. Government-subsidized school-feeding programmes have been instituted in many developing countries, including India, Bangladesh, Brazil, Swaziland, and Jamaica (World Food Programme 2002). However, there is little evidence about how cost effective these interventions are. Kristjansson et al. (2016) provide an analysis of the costs of school-feeding programmes, and identify the factors that influence their effectiveness. Overall, they find that school and preschool-feeding programmes are important policy strategies against undernutrition, and suggest ways to improve their cost effectiveness.

### **3 Conclusion**

This paper has documented important policy shifts in the international aid architecture from a productivist approach to education aid that characterized the early years of the post-Second World War period to a developmentalist approach that began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and which has dominated since then the global education agenda.

The collective objective of achieving universal access to primary education under the MDGs, and the steady increases in education aid that followed, has helped improve significantly primary school enrolment rates in every single region of the world since 1990. While this approach facilitated a global focus on a concrete traceable objective, it ignored important interactions and complementarities between different levels of education. Clearly, a major challenge for the future global education agenda will be to find the right balance between supporting access to education across different levels of instruction while improving their quality. This will require holistic and tailored approaches that combine supply-side policies with community-level participation and incentives for teachers, students, and schools.

A general conclusion arising from this analysis is that a shift in the aid architecture from project aid to programme-based approaches is highly desirable. However, evidence also indicates that the international community has struggled to abide by the principles of the Paris Declaration. This occurs partly because donor motivations are not purely altruistic; there is an array of technical and political economy drivers behind their actions.

For aid to be effective at improving the quality of education, a system-wide approach involving more actively the governments of recipient countries, NGOs, and other actors such as the private sector, will be required. This will be challenging though as donor (and incumbent governments in recipient countries) are driven by the desire for quick and demonstrable results, which oftentimes lead to the heavy reliance on short-lived projects that limit the capacity of aid agencies to build sustainable institutional capacity. A major challenge for the future global education agenda will be to reconcile the discretionary objectives of donor countries (and the priorities of developing countries) with the ambitious goals and targets of the SDGs.

The globalization process, coupled with the revolution in information technology, has facilitated the replicability of policy innovations across different contexts. However, as is often the case, what works in one context may not necessarily work in another. Policy ‘successes’ materialize when explicit efforts are made to understand the local needs and tailor policy features. Giving governments and local partners real ownership over the development process is fundamental here. After all, the principal drivers of social change are domestic, not external.

Evidence indicates that aid has played an important role in bringing children into the classroom. It has also helped innovate and develop education policies that support the building blocks of development and economic progress of developing nations. However, some words of caution

are in order here. Even though education aid has been in general good for developing countries, its impact is moderate, and does not always work well in all places. Two important issues are worth pointing out here:

First, education aid is likely to be more effective in contexts with relatively good institutional capacity. In contexts of conflict and state fragility, donors may need to trade aid effectiveness for the prioritarian objectives of post-conflict recovery and state-building efforts, at least in the short and medium term. Second, the social returns to educational investment usually materialize in the longer-term, and the involved policies, processes, and innovations often require ‘trial and error’ before yielding the desirable results.

Several studies have examined various policy strategies aimed at improving access to, and quality of, education in developing countries. Some of these policies include improvements in school infrastructure, changes in class size and class composition, school feeding programmes; teacher education and certification; teacher, pupil, and school monetary incentives, curricular content; graduation requirements, and community and parent participation. The evidence arising from these studies is encouraging but still scant. Overall, it indicates that there is a variety of interlinked factors through which aid impacts educational outcomes. It also shows that beyond design features, contextual factors are often the key determinants in ensuring success in education aid policy.

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