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# Illusions about Development Aid

by Professor Emil Küng, St. Gall/Switzerland

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There have been years full of exaggerated hopes, when the world was also deafened by immensely noisy propaganda, but these years are dead and gone and have been followed by a widespread hangover. People are disappointed because frequently so little has been achieved relatively to the big sums invested. Both the countries from which aid flows and those at its receiving end must now cast their accounts and seriously evaluate them. Where did development aid go wrong? Only after thorough and impartial criticism of the methods so far practised has led to well thought-out suggestions for reforms, will it be possible to free the ship of development aid from the shoals upon which it was virtually stranded. This is a particularly urgent task because, unless it is speedily tackled, the will to help might be paralysed permanently, should misconceived aid programmes inevitably lead to failure being continued.

## **Errors Committed**

To give an example about the most typical errors committed: European or American engineers have been sent out to serve a development country as experts for building up industry. Experts of this type usually have acquired the habit in their work to think less of the costs of any given investment than of its technological perfection. For this reason, they will always press for the most advanced machinery to be installed in the planned production plants—consisting precisely of those machines with which they had been familiar at home. In general, they hardly ever think of the fact that conditions for using such machinery in developing countries are vastly different from those in countries where automation is called upon to economise as much as possible in the employment of scarce labour, that the wages level in developing areas is much lower, whilst the technical skill of such labour is also lower than might be desirable, but that there is a plethora of workers who ought to be employed. Their purely technological training and outlook blind them to such obvious facts. Thus, it

has happened for dams and barrages to be built from concrete with the aid of the most advanced labour-saving big machinery, whilst in other countries such structures have been erected from masonry, for which, say, 50,000 men were employed, which was much more effective as pump-priming for the local economy.

## **Causes and Effects**

Attention may here be drawn to a different problem, but where the failure of past development aid policies is even more obvious: education. Educational theory usually takes it for granted that if spending on education is increased, the prosperity of the population so educated will eventually rise, naturally with a certain time lag but inevitably, because improved knowledge and skills will enable people to work more productively. Thus, if we intend to push up the low real incomes in LDCs, to improve their education systems will be the obvious target area where to channel aid. LDCs' governments have faithfully absorbed this lesson, and they were building marvellous and palatial schools as showpieces, in order to prove that they are spending more on education. Frequently, the costs of these increased educational investments had to be borne by the donor countries exclusively. But nobody seemed to trouble his head much about the problems of how to staff these schools, and what kind of syllabus was to be taught in these wonderful educational palaces. The main aim was to create widely visible showpieces in the minimum of time.

Hard experience shows, however, that even the presumed chain of cause and effects upon which such educational aid is based must be doubtful. It might be equally possible that higher prosperity be the cause of bigger spending for education, and not the other way round. Should this be the case, the two events or developments still remain closely linked. From the European past, we learn that compulsory schooling did not come prior, as its cause, to economic development but the other way round, it was more of an effect

of the rise in prosperity. In fact, there were whole generations of peasant farmers and industrial workers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries consisting of illiterates. Only after industry generally began to spread more widely, it became the cause of universal and compulsory schooling appearing to be indispensable. At the same time, growing prosperity—created by industry—made it for the first time possible to finance universal education. Yet the Third World of today frequently stands these experiences on their heads though it has already been found out that universal schooling and training sometimes have minor effects upon economic growth, so that much of the investment on education is wasted, showing no results whatever.

### **What People Tend to Forget**

To see why this must be so, it is only necessary to visualise conditions in a subsistence economy, where the vast majority of people scratch a bare living from farming, which produces only marginally more than the farmer and his family need for themselves. This means that these farmers do not either sell anything to people outside their village nor do they buy, they do not know markets or money and its uses to any significant extent. To build elementary schools in such surroundings means that local children may learn "the three R's" but they never need or use these skills for doing their daily work, and clearly, these new skills also do not aid them in the least in increasing their productivity. They are knowledge which has been absorbed only superficially and mechanically, and it is therefore also quickly forgotten after schooling has been finished. In these surroundings, education is a pure consumption good and not an investment which may later yield more than has been invested. In a similar way as cigarettes, this kind of educa-

tion is burnt up in smoke and dispersed without any lasting economic effect. Only on condition that the knowledge taught and learnt can be utilised every day, there might be some success in educating the population.

Based on this experience, it is another fallacy to believe that those who have learned to read and to write would automatically become the agents of the innovations required to awaken subsistence farming from its millennial slumber. Even if developers do not rest content with setting up primary schools only but build also secondary ones, it has been found that those who have passed through both primary and secondary education "successfully" may well be in possession of beautiful diplomas but can do nothing for thoroughly changing conditions in their own surroundings. One of the reasons for this is that, in a tribal society, they are the juniors who have no say in affairs of the tribe, whilst their elders are often disinclined to agree to any reforms. Another one is that school has not transmitted to them any of the knowledge which would be needed for promoting such changes. Last but not least, there is the perennial penury, which does not permit to finance such innovations. In short—things remain as they were.

### **Conceit of the Educated**

All this is true of remote areas where the economy is almost wholly tied to subsistence farming but it is not completely true of other areas where urban civilisation may irradiate into the countryside. But what may happen there is typified by what a manager of a big rubber plantation in West Africa said: "For God's sake, keep away from here with your educational efforts. Once a native has been made to believe that he is able to read and write, he will strictly refuse to con-



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tinue working with his hands." Without doubt, this is an attitude widespread among "educated people". The remark which we have quoted refers not only to people with a so-called academic education but to all those who have carried off some sort of diploma, which is to them a source of pride and will be used by them to enhance their status in their surroundings. But in most cases, the rise in social prestige is bound up with shedding the obligation to work and with acquiring the right to order others about. It hardly matters whether such privileges are based on genuinely superior knowledge and skills.

It is thus easy to make out that, under certain conditions, no education may be economically more advantageous than a kind of education leading to the results described. Instead of useful training, such education spoils people for any useful work by giving them conceit. Diploma holders now feel a "higher vocation", especially believing themselves to be capable of replacing foreign specialists or, at least, of giving orders to such specialists. Particularly, immediately after a "young" nation became independent, there was a strong trend to "localise" its administration and economy, by replacing foreigners by local nationals. It was obvious from the very beginning that many such changes could only have disastrous results, due to the poor education of the local men and their immense pride in this education. But once the key positions have been filled, the "élite" which is gradually growing up does not find many posts open to it—except in the countryside.

### **The Flight from the Jungle**

In this context, an additional harmful effect of naive educational efforts, to which even organisations like UNESCO are prone, becomes visible, because everybody in possession of any kind of certificate, disdains ever to accept work in the countryside, and this is true of many areas of the world. Since such certificate holders find it *infra dig.* to do any physical work, and since not many scribes are needed in remote villages, and moreover, since town life is much more attractive and status-enhancing, the former pupils lose all their original ties which once bound them to their native surroundings. Instead, they swell the armies of the urban unemployed, or they find a little niche somewhere in administration, where they "work" only to delay the completion of real work. There are no more blatant examples for the validity of Parkinson's Law to be found than in the civil service of LDCs.

Because of such effects of education, it is no wonder that parents of potential pupils in the

villages frequently show the greatest reluctance against sending their children to school. They know very well that the infiltration of the school system into their society destroys traditional social structures, and even after they have consented to send their children to a school, they often make them leave it again prematurely. This is one of the reasons why exceptionally high "dropout rates" among the school population of, say, some African countries are reported. It may also be the case that teachers who are to work in the jungle or steppe schools are often of very inferior quality, because all the people of superior talent and knowledge will follow the fatal attraction of urban centres of "culture". At any rate, there is no question that rural pupils might be taught skills of a practical value, e.g. in farming or cattle raising.

### **An Ideal of Education**

This leads us to another source of failure. As an illustration, we have a look on the countries formerly ruled by the British. There, secondary and higher education, which also embraces training of the teachers of all levels, was originally built up following exactly the system existing in the homeland of the colonial power. After ex-British colonies and protectorates became independent, they hardly changed anything in this structure, because Britain remains to this day the great model country. But British education, even now, is largely geared to bringing up "gentlemen", i.e. people skilled in sports and being good social mixers and comrades, who ought to know something of the classical languages and of modern politics. But they will hardly be called upon to acquire solid and useful knowledge of a special subject, be it chemistry or insurance, electrical engineering or modern methods of management. Gentlemen are rather expected to be able to select all such specialists and to supervise and guide them successfully.

In Britain itself, it is common and accepted knowledge that such an ideal for education is no longer suitable for the present age, and that the disease of the British economy having marked time for a long period has its origin, among other things, in the lack of real experts. But the adoption of the British educational system by so many LDCs, more or less completely, and its continuation, is of course bound to have even worse effects. For LDCs have even less need of people formed in the image of white colonial officials and officers, or of the sahibs, their urgent requirements are for agricultural and industrial experts of such a high standard and skill that they are able to plan innovations and to press successfully for their adoption. To be able to play

polo, to be excellent in barrack-square training of soldiers, and to carry a swagger stick under the arm, are utterly useless and even harmful gifts. It is equally and absurdly inutile to know by heart Cicero's speeches or Hamlet's soliloquy, or to learn about European wars or about the intricacies of the British constitution.

### **The Key to the Magic Lock**

These hints indicate that it is a complete fallacy to expect, from a mere increase in spending on education, to obtain a guarantee for economic growth. Actually, spending on education, by itself, is not the key unlocking the door to social and economic growth. Whether it may become the key depends entirely on what is taught and how it is taught. In this connection, it deserves to be emphasised that LDCs simply cannot afford to run their education along the same lines as a wealthy nation. Knowledge, in such countries, must never be treated primarily as goods for consumption, which tend to enrich the lives of the knowledgeable. On the contrary, they must be treated as investment goods, which are to yield material profits. This means that the yardstick for valuing them must be the degree of their utility, because the scarcity of resources does not permit of waste. But, up to now, there cannot be any doubt that a vast part of spending on education has been completely wasted.

This is the suitable spot in which something ought to be said about fundamental research. Such research, as is well known, aims at gaining new knowledge for its own sake, without any firm connection to its commercial exploitation. True, this kind of research, especially in the sciences, in spite of its lack of worldliness, so to say in spite of itself and without designing to do so, often yields as its by-products highly important and practically useful findings. But nobody can guarantee such fruits of research, and moreover, such fruit may often only ripen after decades of work. This is why fundamental research is a tricky problem for LDCs, and even more so because some basic research is sometimes very expensive. What such countries need, are short-term results with a more favourable input/output ratio. This means that research aiming at practical results is to be preferred, because it deals with problems which may have an immediate impact on the local economy. Everything outside and above this framework must again be branded as a misapplication of talents, skills, and capital funds.

### **Reform of the School System**

What has been said so far must have made it clear that education and training in LDCs are

in crying need of fundamental reform, lest the failures of past development aid be repeated and spread further, and lest such aid run the risk to be starved of funds even more than now. But donor countries and their development organisations cannot be acquitted from contributory responsibility for the failure of aid. They ought to have protested against the uncritical adoption of European school systems and against their spreading unhindered far beyond their original introduction into underdeveloped regions. It would have been their duty to start their own research into education and its effects, before plunging into financing it abroad.

They would have found without any great effort that children in LDCs generally live in a society and a culture which are fundamentally different from those where their northern contemporaries dwell. Rational thinking is badly lacking, and people responsible for policy never think in terms of technological or economic utility. Instead, they act as believers in primitive magic, for whom medicine men are all-powerful, because they are believed to possess superior knowledge. Instead of doubting and questioning, even modern men prefer simply to believe, because their own tradition is hallowed to them and any innovation, at first glance, suspect.

### **Aiming for Adaptation to Reality**

If, in an underdeveloped society, training and education are to achieve more than learning mechanically by heart things that are soon to be forgotten again, it is utterly futile to teach dead languages whose knowledge is no longer considered indispensable even for European medical students. Teaching must operate by demonstration and by setting up personal experience, which means it cannot appeal, in the first instance, to the capacity for abstract thought but must show practical usefulness of knowledge, especially in primary education. Such usefulness could be found in discussing the problems of food habits and health, of local farming, of botany and zoology—but not in the form of purely theoretical school knowledge, which is very remote from practical utility. Priority should be accorded the training of teachers and technicians, of surveyors and farm experts, of veterinaries and foresters, before any lawyer or literary gent is created. Only in this way would it be possible to overcome the problem of the unemployed and of the frustrated intelligentsia, which are products of misguided development investments in a similar way as labour saving devices and production methods and as capital-intensive industrial prestige plants.