

Education Reform in the Current Economic Crisis: An Update

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In 1986, I argued that the problem for education in a period of economic crisis should be analysed at least in part as a political problem, one where those concerned with short-term returns to capital press for cuts in social spending as the most 'rational' route to higher economic growth. Spending on schooling — especially that spending that goes to expanding or improving mass education — inevitably suffers under such pressures unless there are powerful political forces which can resist austerity policies. In the longer run, I argue, educational spending cuts probably *reduce* economic growth — precisely the opposite of what their proponents promise [Carnoy 1986].

I believe that analysis to be still fundamentally correct. Slow economic growth in highly indebted Africa and Latin America continues to have a significant negative effect on educational expansion — hence on the long-term prospects for further growth. The political conflict between pro-austerity and pro-growth forces (those pushing for renouncing foreign obligations and raising domestic consumption and social services) also continues, especially in Latin America, but also in many African countries, and in the Philippines, one of the few Asian heavily indebted economies.

But, given more recent experience, there are three points I would add: (1) The cost of reduced educational spending is even higher in a world economy being transformed by information technology. If anything, changes in production processes using such technology, telecommunications, and new computer products and services, all require more highly educated labour and higher quality education. (2) Many Asian economies have expanded their education rapidly in the last decade, in part because economic growth in Asia has been rapid in this period. I would argue that their educational systems are not in crisis, although many of them should undergo a number of changes. The two most populous economies in the world — China and India — should be able to meet future educational requirements both for a more highly technology-oriented economic development and for mass education because of their successful (largely autarkic)

economic policies. The smaller NICs, such as Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, as well as some second-tier industrialising economies (Malaysia, Thailand), have pursued aggressive educational expansions consistent with their 'high tech' development. (3) This suggests that educational inertia is not universal in the developing world, and that the economic gap between those developing countries able to continue investing heavily in education and those caught in economic crisis is increasing rapidly. The implications for the future of those left behind are serious indeed.

To reduce this gap, each country needs a set of educational initiatives tailored to its specific situation. It is not enough to say that educational spending must increase to such and such a percentage of GNP. In most very poor countries, increasing educational spending alone will not meet demands for universal learning of basic science, math and language skills. In those countries, entirely new curricula and teacher training techniques are needed. What is called schooling in Europe is simply too wasteful of resources to deliver the goods.

In other countries, where resources are available, but are being excessively allocated to the military, tough political questions need to be asked about future development. Where girls are being left out of the educational process, causing untold costs to future educational efforts for both boys and girls, yet another strategy is required. And in many countries, such as those in Latin America, the main issue is educational *quality* for the information age, mainly at the primary level, but also including secondary and higher educational reform. This requires reorienting teacher education and curricula toward problem solving; however, the principal reform needed may be far better educational management of existing educational resources.

References

Carnoy, Martin, 1986, 'Educational Reform and Planning in the Current Economic Crisis', *Prospects*, vol 16, no 2, 205-14.