

Education – poverty – hunger: How do we deal with it?

Nobody can seriously doubt the great importance of education; it is often cited together with healthcare and infrastructure development as the most effective means of combating poverty. The majority of the world's hungry live in remote rural regions. And yet, education alone is not enough, nor do all types of education promote development.

“Education reduces poverty and therefore hunger.” Nobody would dispute this thesis in principle. When it comes to reducing poverty, education is mostly cited together with health and infrastructure, as the three most promising starting points for tackling poverty. Health is not achievable through health infrastructure alone, such as an extensive network of health centres and hospitals, but needs the active participation of the population in prevention, and that in turn requires a minimum of education. The same applies to infrastructure, and especially to modern communications infrastructure. In this respect, the three areas of development are interdependent.

“Education drives rural exodus and weakens rural economies.” Is that the antithesis? Scarcely have the children obtained a satisfactory school-leaving certificate than they no longer want to stay in the village. They migrate to the towns and cities, leaving behind the elderly, the women with small children and the sick, who can no longer maintain all aspects of the rural economy.

Behind this development is a global phenomenon: agriculture is less worthwhile than employment outside agriculture. In addition, manual

labour is regarded as inferior in many countries, especially precisely the poor countries, while white-collar jobs are more highly regarded. Low prices for agricultural produce have reinforced this tendency.

Even repeated attempts to stimulate pupils' interest in gardening and agri-

culture, through school gardens and a school kitchen, where the pupils' meals are prepared from produce from

Working in agriculture is still considered as inferior. Thus, many children with a school leaving certificate prefer to work in the cities.



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Only few primary school teachers are willing to give “green lessons” and support the idea of school gardens.

the school garden, have so far failed in many cases. Primary school teachers do not see it as their responsibility, and there are not enough “science teachers” for school gardens and “green” lessons.

Education offensive in developing countries?

Where can we begin? There is a story that a high-level delegation of government members from Ethiopia travelled to South-East Asia to find out about the economic successes of the fast-developing nations there. To their question “What did you do to kick-start your unprecedented economic growth?”, they always received the answer “We opened more universities and filled them with modern equipment”. Ethiopia now has a network of newly built universities throughout the country, and international sponsors are contributing to the cost. It is to be hoped that this education offensive will be accompanied by the recruitment of sufficiently qualified college staff. Well-trained teachers who are also willing to go to remote districts would then be required for intensifying educational efforts in rural areas.

In addition, Ethiopia has listened to German advisers and is endeavouring to establish a modern vocational college system and improve the training of technicians and engineers, as it is precisely the poor countries who not only require academics but also especially need well-qualified citizens at all educational levels.

Can education be a luxury?

There can never be too much good done for education. In industrialised countries we talk about lifelong learning and a fast-moving world of work,



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which not only regards education as necessary for self-esteem, but which to a large extent has become dependent on the lifelong learning of the workforce, since occupational fields and jobs change within ever shorter spaces of time. But both social demands and financial possibilities vary widely between rich and poor countries. Poor countries have difficulty providing the infrastructure and personnel, and poor people cannot afford the high cost of education, if it has to be borne privately. It is also a question of the time required, that is, of the cost of diverted labour.

General education is therefore indeed a luxury, and even vocational training and work-related further education must be delivered in such a way that it has a direct effect on income. Anything that does not directly lead to an improved income must at least contribute to an improvement in living conditions.

Delivering useless curricula or offering a syllabus that cannot be translated into practical use in poor countries is not just a luxury, but can even be regarded as a waste of scarce resources.

Does education make people happy?

Learning can be great. It satisfies curiosity, provides experience of success, creates a bond among classmates, forges friendships and broadens one’s own opportunities. But often education is just a turn-off, and the walk to school becomes a hated chore. So when we talk about education we must also give some thought to teacher training. Only motivated teachers can foster enthusiasm in children for new things – or they can destroy it. If learning consists only of relentless learning by heart, if the teacher is always right, if discussion is not encouraged, the “vessels” will indeed be full at the end of an educational phase – but at what cost?

By way of an aside, even the most motivated teacher needs a minimum of equipment, but in many schools in poor countries the situation is catastrophic. An education offensive should also consider this: improve the educational infrastructure, train motivated teachers and make them familiar with using new teaching materials.

Education as the route to self-determination for women?

Inadequate access to education particularly affects disadvantaged social groups, including women and, most especially, young girls. They are disadvantaged when, resources being scarce, there is a question of who is to have their school attendance paid for. Special schemes such as the “school feeding” programme, through which girls are given “take home rations” as an incentive to attend school, are one answer, but not one that has so far brought about any fundamental change in attitude.

There is also no guarantee that a good education – possibly an even better one than that of their husbands or brothers – will automatically afford women more recognition. It is often overlooked that this signifies a radical social change, which can result not only in a double burden but also in increasing domestic violence, because women are then less willing to accept the subordinate role expected by society.

Women are needed and have an equal right to education, but education for society as a whole should be considered against the background of the gender impact and the possible counter-reactions and be accompanied by the necessary measures (e.g.

guaranteed legal proceedings, women’s refuges).

Education for rural areas

Basic education in the primary and compulsory school years should be organised in such a way that it opens doors to a successful life on the land. Agricultural and manual skills as well as business practice should be taught in addition to basic knowledge. The EARTH University in Costa Rica provides an interesting example: alongside their degree course the students carry out a business project, through which they attempt to increase their initial capital.

It should be possible to remain in rural areas and receive a more advanced education; modern communications infrastructure makes it possible to combine a job in a rural location with a distance learning course or even a complete online degree. With advances in Internet connections and mobile phones, teleworking is also becoming a possibility in rural areas.

Can market forces provide all the answers?

Is the demand for skilled workers creating the desired supply as well? The effects of globalisation on poor countries and poor population groups are

still hotly disputed. However, a careful observer will be able to ascertain that, increasingly, more developing countries such as China and India have succeeded in moving up to become fast developing countries, and have for some time been outstripping the traditional industrialised states in percentage economic growth rates. Free world trade and globalisation of the economy therefore have the potential to reduce existing inequalities.

If the poor countries were to succeed in resolving conflicts over resources fairly and avoiding civil wars, there would also be new incentives for training and vocational qualifications through economic growth. But globalisation and economic growth assume education on the part of participants and by no means automatically provide it. More privatisation in education reduces equality of opportunity and weakens the motivation of the upwardly mobile, preventing competitive outcomes that would favour true achievers. For this reason, education should remain a state priority.

Education aid to compensate for the brain drain

It is true that a great deal of experience can be gained “on the job”, but an adequate basic education is a prerequisite for specialised higher education. Investors and companies are only prepared to take on the provision of this professional training themselves in areas of innovation. As a rule, it is cheaper to employ skilled workers who have received their training elsewhere. While in the 1950s and 1960s the brain drain, the practice of enticing qualified personnel to leave developing countries for industrialised countries, was frowned upon, nowadays no country is ashamed of quite openly offering special programmes for skilled workers from abroad. If we do not want to



Photo: Hoffmann

Students at the EARTH-University in Costa Rica present their business project.



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We need a new education offensive, including motivated teachers who apply new teaching materials.

Higher agricultural prices are the greatest incentive for intensifying production, and also lead to more investment in the agricultural sector. Today the outlook for this sector is more promising than ever before. So, instead of a Marshall Plan for Africa, we are calling for an education and innovation offensive in all developing countries, with the primary aim of promoting agricultural research, rural infrastructure, renewable energies and basic health-care. In addition, investment in education should be geared towards the labour market and allocated equally to elementary education, vocational training, technical and engineering courses and university education.

give up recruiting skilled workers from developing countries in future, we will have an even greater duty to give more development aid in the form of education aid by way of compensation.

Hopes rest on agriculture

2007 was a record year so far for high food prices, on account of the food crisis. However, in 2008 record harvests and the economic and financial crisis brought prices back down to 2006 levels. Experts are expecting another rise in food prices on the world market in 2009; at the beginning of the year there were already reports of devastating droughts in China and in parts of Australia. Against the backdrop of further increases in the world population, further rises in consumption levels as prosperity increases, and the exhaustion of fossil fuel reserves, which will have to be replaced by renewable energy, including biofuels, there is no medium or long-term scenario in which prices of agricultural produce will not rise again. However, an increase in production can essentially only be envisaged through intensification, especially in the peripheral regions which until now have only been farmed extensively. In order to intensify agricultural production, the primary necessities are investment, innovation and education.

In the foreseeable future, poor countries will hardly be able to compete

seriously with the established industrialised countries or the fast developing countries in industrial production. That leaves the agricultural sector. Growing demand for foodstuffs and at the same time for energy from renewable resources presents a major opportunity. Intensification of agricultural production must also go hand in hand with the establishment of competitive value chains to process and refine the agricultural raw materials appropriately. This is where the opportunities for growth and development lie, together with future tax revenues.

What can be done about poverty and hunger in rural areas?

If fossil fuels become even more expensive, interest in renewable energies, including biofuels, will grow. That also means that there will be no more agricultural surpluses. As soon as the necessary technology is available, it will be possible to convert all surpluses into energy. As with all major changes this process will take some time. There will also be friction, transitional problems and groups who lose out. Linking prices of agricultural produce to rising energy prices also leads to rising food prices, and these price rises hit the urban poor especially hard. On the other hand, new possibilities in agricultural production will create new jobs and strengthen purchasing power.

Zusammenfassung

Ländliche Bildung wird eine Schlüsselressource im Kampf gegen Armut und Hunger. Steigender Bedarf an Agrarprodukten schafft höhere Preise und fördert Investitionen in die ländliche Entwicklung. Diese wird zum Hoffnungsträger für die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung armer Länder. Als Ausgleich für Brain Drain und im Interesse einer gesicherten Versorgung sollten reiche Länder jetzt eine Innovations- und Bildungsoffensive für Entwicklungsländer finanzieren.

Resumen

La educación rural se está convirtiendo en el recurso clave para la lucha contra la pobreza y el hambre. La creciente demanda de productos agrícolas genera precios más altos y fomenta las inversiones en el desarrollo rural. En ello se basan las esperanzas de desarrollo económico de los países pobres. Como compensación para la "fuga de cerebros", y en el interés de contar con un abastecimiento asegurado, las naciones ricas deberían financiar sin demora una ofensiva de innovación y educación para los países en desarrollo.