

# Reviews: Reports and books

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**The Oxfam Education Report**, Kevin Watkins, Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2000, pp. 403, npg<sup>1</sup>

Education in developing countries is in crisis. This has been the message emanating from conferences on education and social development in the 1990s, reports and policy documents from the UN, World Bank and others, and from the national and regional assessment reports prepared for the World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal (April 2000). The implications of this crisis, given the critical role of education in achieving sustainable development and poverty reduction, have been widely documented over the past decade. The *Oxfam Education Report 2000* continues that discussion, adopting as its starting point the now more generally accepted holistic understanding of development which moves beyond a narrow focus on economic growth to an appreciation of its multidimensional nature. This is reflected in the international development targets which link the goals of income

poverty reduction with improved social development. Similarly, the perception of education reflects a move away from the instrumentalist view which dominated education debates during the 1970s and 1980s, to a recognition of the intrinsic value of education and its central role in contributing to individual creativity and improved participation in social and cultural as well as economic development. This understanding and approach, the author acknowledges, is heavily influenced by the human capabilities perspective developed by Indian economist and Nobel prize-winner, Amartya Sen.

The *Report* is aimed at any reader interested in education as a development issue who wishes to delve more deeply into the underlying causes of underdevelopment and the consequences of the failure by states to invest in quality basic education. It covers a broad range of issues linked to the achievement of basic education for all, citing examples from around the globe. It is interspersed with emotive language in order to highlight the scale of the crisis in education, particularly in

Sub-Saharan Africa. Africa's "looming crisis" (p.79) predisposes it to becoming "an enclave of despair". The quality of education is "abysmal" and Africa's prospects are particularly "dire".

As the *Report* runs to over 400 pages with over eighty illustrations it is impossible to do justice to its contents in a short review. In format and design it is less attractive and accessible than similar reports on development or education, for example, the UNDP *Human Development Report*, the *World Development Report* (World Bank) and various UNESCO reports, to which it frequently refers and from which it draws much of its data. Because of the time which elapsed between data collection and the preparation and publication of this comprehensive and wide-ranging report, some of the situations covered have already been overtaken by policy changes, for example, in relation to abolition of school fees in Tanzania and Zambia and experiences in implementing sector wide approaches or SWAPs. The *Report* would benefit from being less ambitious in terms of scope and more focused on areas which build on Oxfam's comparative advantage in the area of education and development. Chapter two,

for example, in examining progress achieved in education in the context of the international development targets, includes a long discussion of the factors which contribute to education quality. Such factors have frequently been identified by educationalists and are covered in various UN and World Bank reports as well as in national assessments and the work produced by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA). Their elaboration here adds little value to the analysis.

Similarly, in its overview of the scale of the education crisis the *Report* reiterates information on what are already well documented issues. It criticises the lack of progress, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, since the promise of education for all made at the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien (1990). It notes the widespread education disparities, as a result of gender, ethnic and geographical factors, which still persist throughout the world, but particularly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The impact of HIV/AIDS on education, the potential further marginalisation of the least developed countries by the digital divide, and the transfer of inappropriate grandiose

schemes for promoting information technology are considered. The burden of debt on poor countries and its impact on their capacity to increase expenditure on basic education are revisited. The international community is legitimately criticised for its failure to provide an adequate response to the crisis while national governments are held to account for their failure to invest sufficient resources in basic education. Interventions by NGOs which are not integrated into a national planning framework, and the setting up of parallel programmes in areas like non-formal education are found to have little long-term impact. These issues are widely discussed in the development literature and strategies for addressing these problems have been elaborated in the various fora on education and development held since the mid 1990s, when the lack of progress on the targets set at Jomtien began to be articulated. These issues were reiterated last year at the World Education Forum held in Dakar where a Framework for Action was set out.

Measuring progress in education has been particularly difficult in that context. The *Report* claims credit for developing a new analytical tool, the Education Performance Index, which

provides a set of composite indicators by concentrating on coverage, completion and gender equity, giving equal weighting to each, and making comparisons with the income ranking of countries. In many respects this tool merely confirms, (as the author acknowledges), that deprivation in education is closely linked to income poverty and disparities in financing. Like other forms of measurement, for example, the UNDP Human Development Index, it captures only the situation in society as a whole and fails to reveal local and regional disparities. This tool is useful in highlighting the need to address local inequities and to integrate operational research into monitoring systems. The lessons learned from the experiences of NGOs highlighted in Chapter 6 suggest that there is scope for further refinement of the EPI as an instrument for supporting local monitoring and evaluation systems in the context of national sector plans. NGOs might consider how they could play a more strategic role in supporting such processes.

The Agenda for Action outlined in the final chapter takes the Dakar Framework for Action as its starting point. It advocates the development of national plans for EFA which are integrated into Poverty

Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). The earlier analysis in Chapter 5 of the PRSP process and the proposals for a more participatory approach contribute to the debate on this very complex issue. Changing public spending priorities and using aid and debt relief more effectively, combined with the establishment of special poverty funds along the lines of the Poverty Action Fund (PAF) in Uganda are also prescribed as a way forward. This Fund was initially introduced to capture HIPC resources and was supplemented by additional funds from donors. However, it is now being realised that such modalities can serve to undermine good budget management and are unsustainable. Global initiatives may eventually be found to suffer from the same limitations and should be critically evaluated.

While lack of capacity is raised as an issue in the *Report*, there is little discussion of how capacity might be built. Use of technical assistance is criticised but it would be useful if insights were provided on how it might be used to greater effect. Regardless of the problems associated with global initiatives or special funds and their potential to undermine national systems development and budget

processes, the ultimate success of such initiatives will depend on the capacity to plan and implement at the local level. Translating the rhetoric of the international agenda into relevant action at the local level demands fewer prescriptive solutions and a greater awareness in practice that achievements are contingent on local realities and capabilities.

- 1 The views expressed are the author's and do not necessarily coincide with those of Ireland Aid.

*Liz Higgins*

**World Development Report  
(WDR) 2001/2002 –  
Building Institutions for  
Markets, World Bank,  
Oxford University Press,  
2001, 249 pp, npg**

The subtitle for this report, "*Building Institutions for Markets*", represents the latest indication that economists and policymaking bodies are taking the role of institutions seriously. Indeed, some recent research reveals that institutions are taking over from factors such as geography as the fundamental determinant of economic development (see MIT Working paper *Reversal of Fortune: Geography and Institutions in the Making of the Modern World Income Distribution* by Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson). Institutions here are to be interpreted in a broad sense and include social norms, rules and enforcement mechanisms as well as the more obvious examples of government and financial systems. While the importance of institutions for economic development has always been known, studies of the influence institutions have on long-run growth have always been hampered by a number of factors. First, since institutions may take some time to have an impact on living standards it can be difficult to have a sufficiently

long run set of data on any individual country to get some quantitative idea of the size of this effect. Thus researchers are limited to making cross-country comparisons at given points in time. The problem here, of course, is that it is almost impossible to control for the many unobservable (but surely important) factors which differ across countries. Second, there has sometimes been a reluctance to examine the role of factors which can be intrinsically difficult to measure, such as the quality of institutions, as opposed to more easily quantified factors such as the openness of the economy. Thankfully, the increased availability of data sources on such measures as corruption, freedom of the press and government effectiveness means that standard economic analysis can be carried out taking account of such clearly important factors as the quality of institutions. A third and final complication has been that in analysing development and institutions it is evident that causality can work both ways. Good institutions will certainly aid development but equally countries which are at a higher level of development, may demand better institutions.

The *WDR 2002* concentrates on the role of institutions in helping markets work. Rather than simply

recommending market solutions as the cure for all ills, the *Report* recognises that for markets to work properly, appropriate supporting institutions are required. Four main recommendations are made in relation to the building of effective institutions. Firstly, institutions should be designed to complement what already exists in a country. Thus the emphasis is as much on reforming existing institutions as it is on designing new institutions. There is little point in introducing institutions which may work in a developed economy into a country which simply does not have the support structure to sustain them. To give a related example, this reviewer can recall carrying out spreadsheet analysis of health data in Africa in the 1980s, knowing all along that the underlying figures were almost certainly hopelessly inaccurate. Thus just as appropriate technology was something of a catchphrase in the 1970s and 1980s, so the World Bank believes that appropriate institutions are the key for this decade.

Following on from this, the second recommendation is on the need to innovate in order to design institutions which work and drop those which do not. Thus experimentation, even though it may entail

short-term costs, is worthwhile in helping identify new and effective structures. Countries must also have the courage to drop institutions which do not work. The third recommendation concerns the need to connect communities of market players through open information flows and open trade. As pointed out in the anecdote concerning Maghribi traders in the eleventh century which opens the *Report*, once communities engage in trade outside their existing networks, the need for supporting institutions becomes even more acute. The final recommendation is to promote competition among jurisdictions, firms and individuals, which in turn will modify the effectiveness of existing institutions and create demand for new institutions.

The *Report* then discusses these issues in relation to firms, government and society. The section on firms examines farmers, corporate governance and financial systems. The section on government analyses political institutions, the judicial system, competition and infrastructure, while that on society concentrates on informal norms and networks as well as the media.

On the positive side the *Report* is extremely comprehensive and the reference section is extensive,

indicating considerable effort and scholarship. What is also noticeable about the references is the extent to which they draw upon the very latest economic research. Most references are to work carried out in the last two years, much of which is still at working paper stage. Given the need to tailor solutions to local conditions there are wide-ranging examples from Morocco in the eleventh century to transition economies in Eastern Europe in the twenty-first century. The statistical appendix, as ever, contains a wealth of useful information, and although not available in the text, the *Report* discusses an intriguing background study undertaken in over 100 countries on judicial speed and efficiency.

In a report as detailed as this probably everyone could find something to quibble with. Let me mention just two areas where I feel the *Report* is somewhat disappointing. The first concerns the promotion of competition with regard to institutions among jurisdictions, individuals and firms. Presumably the enthusiasm for this in the *Report* stems from the well-known gains from competition in the provision of goods and services. But there are also dangers in drawing too close an analogy between

competition in goods and services and competition among institutions. The type of services which institutions typically provide are of the sort which Rawls has labelled "primary goods" i.e. goods which embody rights and which everyone should have equal access to, such as protection of their property, good governance, the enforcement of a contract etc. In this case everyone should have equal weight in the market and not have their weight in the market determined by their spending power, as is the case with goods and services. Yet the World Bank gives the impression that, like firms in product markets, institutions must respond to the consumer. Yes, but as long as consumers receive equal weighting, and not in such a way that institutions develop in response to the needs of powerful interest groups.

The second shortcoming concerns the *Report's* coverage of the role of different types of institutions at different levels of development. In very underdeveloped societies the likelihood is that most people will trade and interact within their own locality. In such cases informal networks at village level will probably provide an adequate source of information for most transactions. At the other end

of the scale, in modern developed economies the scope and range of trade and other interactions is much wider. However, institutions and information networks are also vastly more sophisticated. The case of most interest is of a society in the relatively early stages of development, where informal networks at village level are breaking down, perhaps because of migration to urban areas, but where institutions have not developed at the same pace. It is in these cases that the gap between the level of development and the quality of institutions is at its widest and greater discussion of how to bridge this gap and carry out the transition from predominantly informal institutions to predominantly formal ones would have been welcome.

However, overall this *Report* is an essential item on the bookshelves of all people and organisations concerned with economic development. Readers may be interested to know that the whole *Report* is available for download from the World Bank website, which incidentally is well worth visiting anyway in terms of data and research.

*David Madden*

### **Participation of the Poor in Development Initiatives:**

**Taking their Rightful Place,** Carolyn M. Long, Earthscan, 2001, Stg £15.95

For at least twenty years there has been a growing body of evidence that participation by poor and marginalised people in development initiatives intended to benefit them is a significant factor in achieving sustainable outcomes. More recently this has extended to participation in policy discussions as well as development initiatives. While this may seem self-evident, especially from an NGO perspective, it is still at an early stage of acceptance in most multilateral and bilateral donor agencies as well as in recipient government implementing agencies.

Carolyn Long's book examines the background to this growth in the adoption of participatory approaches, primarily by NGOs and community-based organisations, and the impact these approaches have had in terms of improving social and economic conditions, increasing the capacity of the poor to engage in development activities and making progress towards more democratic and accountable structures. Long provides a detailed examination of the work undertaken in the World



Bank since the late 1980s to promote participation by the poor, and the central advocacy role played by NGOs in raising and pushing this issue with the Bank. Long also looks at the experience of official donors, USAID, DFID, GTZ and SIDA, in addressing the challenge of participation. She describes the issues confronting the implementing agencies of Southern governments in adopting participatory approaches. Her research leads her to draw out a series of lessons from the work undertaken in these agencies which are useful in identifying ways in which further progress can be made.

Long concludes that there has been progress in putting participation closer to the heart of the development process but points out that these measures have been undertaken in a partial and *ad hoc* way rather than in a systematic and committed manner. From the evidence she presents it is clear that efforts at improving the levels of participation by the poor in both development activities and policy formulation face severe challenges. Donor agencies are driven by bureaucratic needs, the demand to approve loans or grants, traditional project structures and processes, and career paths based on efficient management of the project

cycle. She points out that in many of these agencies key management staff have not been converted to a belief in the value of participation, and have not therefore put in place policy or best practice approaches which promote participation. The implementing agencies of Southern governments also face a variety of problems in achieving improved levels of participation. These include rigid hierarchies, "colonial" systems, ethnicity factors and weak structures of governance.

Long describes situations where implementing agencies have undertaken significant transformations which have resulted in increased benefits and levels of participation for the primary stakeholders – the poor. However, in the World Bank, structural adjustment programmes constitute well over half of all loans and this type of lending has, Long says, "been impervious to participation". She also points out that promoting participation within USAID has been made difficult by the direct linkage of US foreign aid with US foreign policy interests regardless of development considerations.

Long argues that the rigid use of a "projects based" view of development and the demands of project management from donors place huge constraints on

participation by primary stakeholders (the poor), as project timeframes and efficiencies have to be met which mitigate against successful participation and also, of course, against improved rates of success. Long points out that an analysis of projects across a variety of donor agencies indicates considerable participation by the poor at the level of project implementation, (not unexpected as they are usually required to commit resources such as money or labour), with only limited participation at the identification, design or evaluation stages. Participation is made even more difficult for poor people due to their lack of access to information, including access to translated documents, a lack of flexibility in project and policy formulation which leads to a failure to root these within local or national requirements, and a lack of skill at both donor and local level in participatory project and policy development.

There is also evidence that even when primary stakeholders are involved only the most powerful have a say. At the same time donor agencies see their main accountability as being to their parliaments or tax payers rather than to the poor. This, in turn, results in a strong

desire for centralised control and a tendency to minimise local influence in project design.

Long's view, on the basis of the experience so far, is that incorporating participation of the poor into development initiatives is a long-term process. The primary responsibility for ensuring this happens rests with donor agencies. Change within these agencies requires a commitment from the top, a learning environment and participation throughout their organisational structures. Strong advocacy partnerships among NGOs, which are capable of being sustained over long periods of time, are also essential to progress, as is a solid commitment from donor governments and parliamentarians. Long also believes that donors can do much more than heretofore to motivate, influence and train Southern governments' implementing agencies to incorporate the participation of the poor in their programmes.

Carolyn Long's book is a timely, useful and accessible assessment of the efforts so far to promote participation. Her account of the efforts over the past 15 years to encourage initiatives around participation within the World Bank is very interesting, especially as a backdrop from which to view the process around Poverty

Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). Are these PRSPs another step along a path towards promoting greater participation? Or will the efforts taken founder on the rocks of lack of commitment to genuine participation, time constraints and the opposition of Southern governments?

From an Irish perspective this book is also timely. The review of Ireland Aid, the Irish Government's official aid programme, is about to be completed. Recent discussions between NGOs and Ireland Aid about involving civil society in development projects and policy are an indication of new thinking within Ireland Aid around participation. If we accept that the participation of the poor in development is a right of citizenship, the experiences and lessons in Carolyn Long's book will be very helpful in illuminating the way forward. This text is essential reading for anyone in donor agencies concerned about the need for greater participation by the primary stakeholders in the formulation of development policies as well as in project identification and delivery.

*Eamonn Meehan*

**Development, NGOs and Civil Society: Selected Essays from Development in Practice**, Introduced by Jenny Pearce, Carfax/Taylor and Francis for Oxfam GB, Oxford, 2000, 208 pp., npg

It is impossible to undertake an analysis of development in the majority world today without a consideration of the contribution of NGOs. While often understood and portrayed as vehicles for a more progressive, bottom-up, participatory-based type of development work, a growing awareness has emerged over the decade of the 1990s that many of these organisations differ little from the "development industry" as epitomised by multilateral organisations such as the IMF, the United Nations and its programmes (FAO, UNDP, UNICEF, etc.), and the "developmentalist" wings of western capitalist countries such as DfID (the UK government's Department for International Development) or USAID. While development theory and practice were widely acknowledged to have reached an impasse in the 1980s (Schoorman, 1993), it has become more apparent that many of the underlying inadequacies still remain at the beginning of the new millennium. Specifically, Jenny Pearce in her insightful

and courageous introductory article to the volume under review argues about the urgent need for a *theoretical, normative, and political* basis for a critique of the global order. Pearce stresses that the lack of the above hampers effective development work.

*Development, NGOs, and Civil Society* consists of twelve essays previously published during the 1990s in the Oxfam GB journal, *Development in Practice* along with an introductory chapter written by Pearce. Half of the articles address general issues, while the other half focus on specific countries, namely Uganda (2), Zambia (2), Nigeria, and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the importance of these articles lies not in their detailed analysis of ethnographic data of particular development projects, but in their identification and explication of some of the perceived dilemmas facing NGOs during this period of decreased funding and increased poverty. Pearce points to the fact that official development assistance flows from OECD Development Assistance Committee countries dropped by 20% in real terms, from \$60.8 billion in 1992 to \$48.3 billion in 1997, and that the average proportion of GNP given to overseas aid declined to 0.22% in 1997, less than one-third of

the 0.7% target (p.41).

On the other hand, Pearce notes that “between 1987 and 1993, the number of people with an income of less than \$1 a day increased by almost 100 million to 1.3 billion people, one-third of the population of the ‘developing world’” (p.16). Nevertheless, Pearce is strong in her critique of those who see the problem in terms of “a successful North” and an “unsuccessful South”. On the contrary, she suggests that we need to “question profoundly” this dichotomised schema... “[as] [s]uch a schema discouraged people from asking what kind of world we wanted to build, and instead focused the debate on how the ‘others’ in the third world could become more like us in the first world” (p.17). She points to Rahnema’s (1997) argument concerning the unreplicability of the North’s development (e.g. a single edition of the *New York Times* eats up 150 acres of forest land). The reviewer would point to Schor’s critique of US capitalism in *The Overworked American* (1992) and *The Overspent American* (1998) which suggest that in spite of increased consumption, North Americans are not any happier, have little leisure time, and are trapped in “the insidious cycle of work-and-spend” or what she calls the squirrel cage (1992, pp.107-65).

Jenny Pearce, Professor of Politics and International Development at the University of Bradford, brings her considerable experience in Latin American development issues and the NGO scene in Britain to bear on her analysis of the twelve articles in the publication under review. I suspect that her own engagement with Latin American affairs, an area that gave birth to the more radical traditions of dependency theory and liberation theology, helps explain her sharp critique of the state of debate amongst those working in NGOs. Briefly, Pearce argues that there has been a distinct lack of serious theoretical and political debate about fundamental issues such as what is development, and for whom, and that most of those working in NGOs have colluded "in the myth that a consensus on development exists" (p.15). She argues that there is no such consensus, and that those working in development must first of all clarify where they stand theoretically and politically, in order to be better able to undertake effective development work. She takes issue with Edwards (1999), one of the leading figures in the development business in the UK, who has been a proponent of the more pragmatic, technocratic approach to development,

underplaying the importance of theoretical concerns. On the contrary, Pearce suggests that nothing should be taken for granted, and that "it is surely time for some humbling self-analysis, which includes the question: Do NGOs have a future at all?" (p.19). Underlying Pearce's critique is the assumption that all knowledge is political, and that failure to make explicit the politics of knowledge leads to incoherent and contradictory development work.

Pearce identifies four critical themes in her analysis of the twelve essays, namely NGOs and neo-liberalism; the roles and relationships of international (Northern) NGOs and Southern NGOs; NGOs and the state; and theory, praxis, and NGOs. While grounding her critique in a close reading of these particular contributions, she demonstrates the more general relevancy of her analysis by reference to the wider debates in development issues, and specifically frames her discussion in the context of three international conferences held in Britain during the 1990s which focused on the roles of NGOs.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Pearce notes that by the second conference in 1994, an obvious split had occurred between a majority who focused on technical changes and a minority who were calling for a

focus on politics. By the final conference in 1999, though it included representatives from a wider spectrum of NGOs from both the North and South than the earlier two, there was still a failure to engage with the fundamental challenge for NGOs, namely "to return to their role as promoters of social change and of non-market values of co-operation, non-violence, and respect for human rights and democratic processes, and to make these the 'bottom line' in decisions over economics and the environment, social policy, and politics" (Edwards, Hulme, and Wallace, 1999, p.13 – in Pearce, p. 24).

At the end of her essay, Pearce identifies four possible choices open to development NGOs at the beginning of the twenty-first century, though she does not claim that they are mutually exclusive or exhaustive. NGOs can choose to work within the neo-liberal approach by administering welfare; they can argue for new forms of regulation of global capitalism; they can side with the anti-globalisation movement; or they can prioritise grassroots work, building on the Gramscian idea of the "organic intellectual" (p.39). Pearce is open to a plurality of possibilities in terms of action and alliances, but she warns of the danger of the failure to undertake a serious thinking

through of the implications of a "theoretical, normative, and political critique of the existing global order".

In addition to providing the reader with a critical understanding of the major challenges facing development NGOs in the new millennium from a radical perspective, this volume includes a useful annotated bibliography of thirty-eight relevant books as well as an annotated list of eight journals and sixteen development organisations with e-mail and website addresses. Thus, *Development, NGOs and Civil Society*, provides the reader with both a challenging theoretical perspective and a range of more practical information. However, a more in depth explication of the critical perspective proposed by Jenny Pearce is certain to be found in the recently published monograph entitled *Civil Society and Development: A Critical Exploration* (2001) written by Pearce and her colleague, Jude Howell.

*Kathy Glavanis*

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## Footnote

- 1 The three international conferences on NGOs were "Scaling up NGO impact on development: learning from experience" (1992), "NGOs and development: performance and accountability in the new world order" (1994) and "NGOs in a global future" (1999). The first two were organised by Michael Edwards and David Hulme, and the third by Edwards, Hulme, and Tina Wallace.