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# *Protection of the Textbook Industry in Developing Countries: In the Public Interest?*

Stephen P. Heyneman

*Many developing countries protect their textbook industries to safeguard national image, local jobs, infant industries, and foreign exchange. Yet, as this article points out, protection itself has costs, and these costs have become excessive. Reducing protection for textbook production, the author argues, would benefit both education and economies in developing countries.*

Questions about protecting the textbook industry in developing countries deserve our full attention, which I hope to trigger by taking a provocative standpoint and exaggerating slightly what I believe. I would like to discuss why, under what circumstances, how, and who among governmental or nongovernmental bodies should be in the business of producing educational materials. And I am going to make the case that governments should get out of the business of textbook production. Publishers who are not employed by governments may find this a very welcome piece of advice, but my arguments may shock those who are.

## **Some Definitions and Assumptions**

### *Education is an Industry*

Although education is almost universally conceived of as a social service, it is also an activity concerned with the supply, maintenance, distribution, and consumption of certain commodities. The capacity of companies or organizations to design, manufacture, distribute, and to redesign, remanufacture, and redistribute these commodities is as much an industrial process as is the making of automobiles, glass, or furniture, or the provision of pharmaceuticals. Like any industry, it has social effects, provides a social service, and performs social functions. Education may be more readily associated with

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value-laden concepts than the making of glass, but it is an industry nevertheless, entailing in many parts of the world competition, copyrights, and financial investors. All of these features have implications for efficiency and effectiveness of supply.

### *The Production Process*

I have isolated three basic series of actions in the process of producing textbooks: first, the design of printed pedagogic materials; second, the manufacturing of these materials—that is, the printing; third, their distribution. It is important to distinguish these three elements because the answers to who should do what or the situations under which protection is or is not justified may differ for each set of operations.

### *What is Protection?*

I have tried to define protection in this context rather broadly: it is the act of insulating one or more parts of the production process from nongovernment, local, or international supply, *at a cost*. In other words, if it does not involve additional costs, it is not protection. Usually the cost is a social one, a cost to the public, not to the individual.

### *Textbook Contents*

It is not my intention to question the role of sponsors—governments or others—in specifying what goes into textbooks. The design and manufacture of textbooks can respond to specifications set by ministries of education, by churches running school systems, by whoever sponsors schooling. Thus the contents of textbooks, the public responsibility, and the public's role in deciding what children should learn are not at issue.

## **The Background: Political and Economic Contexts**

### *The Political Context*

There are two important elements to add to the setting of this discussion. The first is the political context, in which we find the assumption, generally formalized in writing and signed by governments after World War II, that education is a human right. All signatories to the United Nations agreed that education, as a human right, should be available to all, free of private cost. This aspiration forms a large part of the background to the problem at issue here. It is the assumption with which all countries join the UN, and on which countries have been operating for many years. Another assumption was added, however, in the 1960s: that education should be supplied by governments. Private suppliers of education and of educational materials have been as-

sumed to be unable to take on the task, and governments have been expected to provide free education. The same expectations hold with health care nowadays, and so do the questions as to whether or not to continue to provide these services free of private cost.

### *The Economic Context*

The economic context includes several features that we have to acknowledge as features of today's world. First, in many countries around the world, particularly those we at the World Bank refer to as International Development Association (IDA) countries—where the *per capita gross national product* did not exceed US\$425 a year in 1986—the per capita GNP has declined significantly in the last ten or fifteen years. Most countries in sub-Saharan Africa, some in Latin America, and some in Asia have experienced this decline. Zambia, for example, has seen its per capita GNP decrease by 20 percent in the last decade. From a middle-income economy or International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) borrower status until the early '80s, it has become an IDA borrower. Similarly in Ghana, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Senegal, the economic situation is seriously deteriorating and it is deteriorating quickly. Some may ask, what is a good measure of GNP per capita? How reliable and comparable are those estimates? Those estimates are very problematic indeed and present real limitations. But no citizen of Ghana denies that things are getting worse. It is obvious. So we may argue over the degree, but not over the trend. Things are getting worse.

Second, all of a sudden, most government budgets are featuring a new part of which no one had ever heard twenty years ago: *the debt service*. On average, low-income countries now have to allocate 22 percent of their foreign exchange earnings to service their national debt. This can range from a low of 11 percent, as in India or China, to highs of 26 percent in Jamaica, 33 percent in Colombia, and 45 percent in Algeria. The typical developing country has today enough foreign exchange to cover less than three months of imports. Today one refers to acceptable or unacceptable portions of the national budget going toward paying off, not the *principal* of national debt, but the *service*. And that is a serious problem. If you had a totally new expenditure in your family budget, you would have to take money for it from one or more of the existing envelopes. Countries are similar to households in that regard: for them, this has translated into a decline in the amount of resources available for agriculture, for transportation, for health, for education. These resources have shrunk, and so has the capacity of governments to assume the responsibilities they claimed for themselves in the 1960s. Thus, regardless of political orientation, nations have to ask: What is more important? Where can I save money? It is no longer relevant to proclaim that all children should receive free education if we cannot afford to provide it. We have to ask: At what cost? How? How can we deliver it under the present circumstances? These are the only relevant questions. Aspirations of the past need to be revisited. All sectors in govern-

ments are being squeezed, and decisionmakers in every single sector are asking themselves the same questions: Where can I cut? What is more important, and what is less important? In most countries, this is the plight of the education sector as well.

Third, we should look at the amounts of money that groups of countries were able to spend on primary school children between 1970 and 1980. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries' *expenditure per child* have climbed from \$1,200 to \$2,200 in that decade. There are two reasons for the increase: first, more money is available for education in OECD countries; second, there are fewer children to spend it on. In the middle-income economies, too, per capita school expenditures have gone up: from \$135 to \$180 in the same period. However, although these countries—the Indonesias, the Malaysias, the Brazils, the Colombias, the Nigerias—are able to give their children more resources now than they could afford to ten years ago, their spending has fallen even further behind that of the OECD group. In the lower-income group, the "IDA countries," the actual spending per child dropped from \$122 a year to \$87 a year! If you prefer ratios, for every dollar that Malawi could spend on its primary school children at independence, Sweden could afford \$14. That was in 1960. In 1970, for every dollar that Uganda could spend on its primary school children, Sweden could afford \$22. And by 1980, when Malawi and Uganda were still spending their single dollar on their children, Sweden was spending \$50. And that is another serious problem. We do have to ask whether, regardless of the moral flavor of our intentions, we are able to deliver what we have promised.

Fourth, when we consider spending for education, we are talking about delivering what we hope to be *better quality education*. If we are able to spend a dollar per child, we may be able to provide only one book per class. The teacher copies the content of that single book onto the blackboard, and the children copy from the blackboard into their notebooks. Then the children try to memorize what is in their notebooks. This is the "copy/copy situation": a semieducated teacher, underpaid (often unpaid these days), copying (probably inaccurately) from a book (probably old and inappropriate to the local curriculum). What does this yield? Rote memorization of poor information, often illogical or with large gaps in logic, or out-of-date facts and interpretations, and with no explanations as to how and why. That is the basic engine of education in most IDA countries, the typical education millions of children receive all over the developing world.

If we are able to spend about three dollars per child, the situation improves greatly. We will usually be able to afford one book per child per year, for each subject. The Chinese case is a good illustration. Every year, every child in China gets a new book in every subject: one book in arithmetic, one in geometry, one in history. This is an enormous improvement, but the book in question is in miserable shape. It is poorly manufactured, it falls apart; the

map of Asia shows countries and names in the wrong place; any page with a map or a drawing of anatomy is barely legible. It might not last the school year. In any case, it is not the kind of book that we would want our children to learn from.

Stage three: We will now spend \$40 per child. Malaysia does, and has progressed so far as to be able to provide half a dozen titles in every subject for children to choose from. In such a situation, the teacher organizes information instead of merely explaining facts. She or he now sees that you have problems in arithmetic and can choose the right book for you, even the right chapter from the right book for you. This entails a total revolution in teacher training and in expectations about what teachers should do. Yet, more can be achieved.

I know you are all aware that the quality of education in many OECD countries is not ideal. We have our share of problems. But quite a lot of learning is probably also taking place. We are spending about \$300 per child per year in reading materials alone. In Sweden, Norway, and Japan there are often more than fifteen titles of supplementary readers available in any subject. In the United States, the number of *library* books per elementary school pupil was 11.9 in 1973 and 16.7 in 1985—a 40 percent increase. In one African country, the trend was in exactly the opposite direction— from an average of 3.7 (*text*, not library) books in 1971 down to 1.0 in 1981. And teachers in the developed countries do not teach from a single textbook anymore, nor from several textbooks. They present information from machine-duplicated or photocopied sheets in specific lesson plans, or from filmstrips, or from computer programs. All of this yields much self-generated learning, so that a child knows how to research information in libraries independently and can denounce a weak argument. Regardless of origin and culture, parents probably want their children to have this opportunity.

How, then, do we get from the “copy/copy” to the one book, to the six books, to the “self-generated learning” situation?

### Why Protection?

If a government manufactures automobiles, glass, furniture, or textbooks instead of buying them or sets up trade barriers against imports, it is going to have a cost. Politicians offer several reasons why governments should incur such costs.

One is because of *national interest*: image, pride. To be and appear a strong nation, we have to have it done in the public sector or we have to protect ourselves from foreign industries. This is why Brazil does not allow importation of computers and why the United Kingdom and the United States protect many of their aerospace industries. It is a common argument which has virtue, sometimes.

*To safeguard local jobs* is another good argument for protection. It is not clear

whether, in the end, the number of jobs will be greater than the number of jobs gained through changes in policy, but the fear of job loss remains a considerable factor.

One also hears that local capacity development requires a grace period. *Infant industries* have to be protected for a while so they can grow strong and meet the competition from outside. The problem is that the infant may be protected until it reaches a very old age. You will find thirty-year-old infant industries. Then the argument changes: "Well, it is no longer an infant, but we do have to protect jobs." Rationales often bounce from one argument to another, depending on expediency.

An argument is also made for *saving foreign exchange*: if we do not protect, we will have to spend foreign exchange on imports. One country insists that all textbooks be printed locally in order to save foreign exchange, but they don't have money to import paper, to maintain their printing presses, or to bring in foreign technicians who can maintain the printing presses. Therefore the presses are down, schoolchildren lack books, and the money is spent elsewhere. The end result is doing without textbooks to save foreign exchange. This is akin to letting the patient die in order not to have to vaccinate him. One has to carefully examine whether and how this kind of protective measure will actually save foreign exchange, and to consider trade-offs. If foreign exchange is so scarce, it will be scarce for a number of activities, including domestic manufacturing.

The last argument is *unavailability of nongovernment supply*. This is also an impressive argument. Take the distribution part of the production process. Often the government takes charge of distribution because its officials argue that no private company will deliver textbooks way up in the northern region. But if no private companies are seeking to take on this job, it may be because there is no demand. Imagine the government deciding to buy half a dozen Land Rovers, build workshops to maintain them, hire half a dozen drivers and maintenance personnel for the vehicles and pay wages to this staff year round, even when there are no deliveries because books are delivered only twice a year. With all the money this scheme requires, couldn't a company be paid to take the books up north? The question is one of proper incentives. Suppose a Ministry of Education official had calculated that it would cost a company £200 to distribute the books in the northern region, and offered it £250. The government would still make a profit by saving £500 on the cost of Land Rovers and civil servants. Perhaps the Ministry of Education could draw upon the services of the Ministry of Works or Transport of Labor. This wouldn't cost the Ministry of Education anything, but it would cost the taxpayers. Although this may be rational for the Ministry of Education official, it may not be rational when the whole social cost is taken into account.

### Protection, Profits, and Trade-offs

First, no protection is free; protection has a cost. Second, all industries cannot be protected at once. If we want to protect our computers, our rice, our

beans, or any agricultural product, and our textbooks, our pharmaceutical products, and this and that product, our economy collapses. Somebody has to make some money in our economy; somebody has to sell something at a price that will bring a profit. And we have to obtain foreign exchange from somewhere. We should also keep in mind that those in education are not the only ones making claims. A multitude of others in other sectors are making claims for protection. Thus, our arguments have to be more convincing than the claims of those others.

Now, we have a financial problem and we know that protection has a cost. We must at least consider the possibility of making some changes. But what changes? I am going to suggest that protection of the textbook industry should be reduced. It is not the only answer, but it is one way to save money in the education sector.

### Revisiting the Textbook Production Process

#### *Design Costings*

Many ministries of education have adopted the policy of designing their own textbooks. I do not mean here determining the contents of textbooks, but designing the first chapter, the second chapter, choosing visual aids, deciding where to insert maps, and the like—choosing the design of the book itself. Many ministries of education pay civil servants to do that. More often than not, it is because nonpublic capacities have not been identified or pursued. I will use the examples of Malaysia and Mexico, which began by designing textbooks in-house and then changed policy. Now the ministries of education determine the contents of schoolbooks, but put designing out for competitive bids from local and international firms. Not all countries have enough such competition, but neither had the Malays or the Mexicans at one time. The point is that they went through the process of helping it develop. Had they not made this choice, the competition still would not exist. It is possible, then, to consider obtaining locally relevant textbooks, written in local languages, that meet Ministry of Education specifications, from nongovernment suppliers.

#### *Printing*

Ministries of education also decide to print their textbooks in-house to preserve jobs, or for many other reasons. But if the ministry has total control over content, and even designs the books, why should the ministry manufacture them? What possible national interest does it serve to manufacture textbooks within the Ministry of Education, or even within the government? Giving the job to the government printer means that it may be free to the Ministry of Education, but it does not mean that it will be cost-free. We must consider the entire cost.



### *Distribution*

Is it really essential for a government to distribute its printed materials itself, with its own civil servants, or are there less costly, more efficient alternatives? If soap and beer and matches get distributed through private companies, why can't textbooks?

Let us now look at some of the factors we need to contend with before trying to answer these questions.

*Size of readership.* Indonesia, for example, has more children in primary school than do the United States and Canada combined. That is a sizable readership. In Sierra Leone, on the other hand, the readership is much smaller. What is economic and what is not economic will vary accordingly.

*Languages and textbook content.* The more international the language used in textbooks, the more competition is likely to be available. Those teaching in English, Spanish, Portuguese, or French will likely find that a variety of products exist on the international market. Those using Haitian Creole will likely have to develop their own materials. And those teaching in a number of local languages are probably going to spend more on materials development. Similarly, the more international the curriculum and textbook content (arithmetic versus national history, for example), the more available the competition, and the less expensive the materials.

*Technical content.* Developing books on human anatomy, geography, or other natural sciences requires investing in materials of good visual quality. It is feasible to mix the kinds of materials and to elaborate unique textual material while importing the visually sophisticated material. And it is possible to arrange with private local or international publishers to use their well-developed maps and visual aids and save the cost of duplicating.

I am thus suggesting that, to answer marketing questions and determine the desirable degree of protection for certain parts of the industry, one should first identify and understand the major characteristics of the clientele.

### **Conclusion**

Let me conclude with more personal remarks and reemphasize that I am representing myself, not the World Bank. I do not think we can continue to use protective measures in the education sector. An era has ended, or it should end, because the longer we maintain certain assumptions—the post-World War II assumptions—the more difficult will be the process of economic development. We all seek the same goal by and large, and that is to provide high-quality education to all our children, at the least cost. Public finances are low; and in all likelihood money is not going to be reallocated from other sectors. That era is over. We have to ask ourselves how we can save money without jeopardizing our objectives. Protection is not affordable.

Changing the textbook production process does not have to affect our standard educational goals. It should not result in books of lesser quality, or with

nonnational focus. If it does, it should not be pursued. Furthermore, changes in the production process may not be the best or the only option. Other sectors—banking and agriculture, for example—are changing their production process very rapidly. It is not a matter of left- or right-wing political economy, of Reagonomics, of competitive or nonmarket economic policy. Deng Ziaoping and Gorbachev have been exploring these same options. This is no longer an ideological issue, but one of effective management. The responsibility of the education sector is to manage that sector well, leaving political orientations aside.

Admittedly, there are pharmaceutical, computer, automobile, and other manufacturing empires in the world. But it is not necessarily true that reconsidering policies on protection benefits them. Companies in Colombia, Nigeria, and Ghana are exporting textbooks; important companies in India are exporting textbooks and textbook technology. Changing the production process will benefit the industry at home, and it may likely benefit "non-OECD" industries. Tapping talent for writing, printing, publishing, and distributing textbooks in, say Ethiopia might soon lead to exporting to Kenya. But Kenya will not be a market unless it, too, has been reconsidering its production process. It all fits together; there are not two worlds but one, which cannot be divided any longer. It is not the big guys in the North controlling everything and the little guys in the South having no responsibility over actions and over change. We can no longer afford protection. Changing the textbook production process is an important option. It will not affect educational goals, and it can benefit local industries.

### Note

This article is a slightly revised version of an address to a workshop, "Printed Materials Development in the Third World," sponsored by the Harold Macmillan Trust and the Canadian Organization for Development through Education, in February 1989, Great Windsor Park, England. Participants were senior government officials, directors of nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and representatives of the publishing industry. The interpretations and conclusions expressed in this paper are entirely and solely those of the author and should not be attributed in any manner to the World Bank or its affiliated organizations.