The World Economic Crisis and the Quality of Education

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Education Expansion

Universal education—the belief that every citizen has the right and the obligation to attend an elementary school—is an outgrowth of the post-World War II era, an era of confidence and aspiration following devastation and destruction. Though precedents can be found from the Nineteenth Century, as a national norm universal education began in Western Europe and quickly spread to what are now known as the OECD countries, to the socialist bloc in eastern Europe and the various republics within the Soviet Union. Many believed universal schooling to be similar to policies whose purpose was to lower the rate of infant mortality, eliminate small pox, and stamp out famine. It became a principle beyond political ideology, a public right, an incontestable social obligation, and a sound economic investment. At the formation of the United Nations, countries signed a charter that called for education to be “universal and free.”

This principle was adopted by India and Pakistan in 1948, and subsequently by each country upon achieving independence or revolutionary redirection—Peoples’ Republic of China, 1949; Indonesia, 1949; Ghana, 1957; Nigeria, 1963. By the end of the 1960s, much of what we now know as developing countries had become independent political states, with in each case education identified as one of the highest public priorities. The effect of these political developments in the areas of the world with the highest growth in the school-age population has created an expansion of the education system to levels literally unprecedented in human history. Moreover, it has created a new shift in the balance of school enrollment away from the industrialized countries of Western Europe and North America toward the developing countries.

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The proportion of the world's enrollment attending school in industrialized countries fell from 34 percent in 1950 to 25 percent in 1975, and is expected to fall to 20 percent in the year 2000. Thus, of the world's school children, 80 percent are in developing countries. Approximately 5 to 6 percent are enrolled in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union; about 12 percent in OECD countries other than in North America; about 2 to 3 percent are enrolled in the U.S. In fact, today there is a greater number of Indonesian pupils than there are American and Canadian pupils combined.

The managerial implications of this expansion are considerable. For example, there are 1.3 million elementary school teachers in India, 856,000 in Indonesia, and 9,000 in Liberia. Each teacher must be paid punctually, supervised regularly, upgraded, and improved systematically over the course of a career. The information required to manage the education sector is worthy of note—monthly reports of attendance, illness, transfers, and achievement progress; and yearly reports of classroom facilities, teacher upgrading programs, discipline problems, income, and expenditures. What the census bureau attempts every decade, the school system attempts each semester. In addition to management information must come goods and services. Mexico must distribute 82 million textbooks each year. They must arrive on time and in good condition before a certain date in September to each of the nation's 57,000 schools.

The managerial challenge is increasing exponentially. The number of elementary school teachers rose by 11 percent in developed countries between 1965 and 1980, but by 59 percent in Africa, 70 percent in Asia, and over 200 percent in Latin America over the same time period.

Similar increases occurred among secondary and post-secondary teaching staffs, only the percentage increases, starting from a universally lower base, are higher. Post-secondary teaching personnel, for instance, more than doubled in Europe and North America between 1965 and 1980, but the increase was by a factor of three in Asia, by a factor of 5 in Africa, and by almost 5.5 in Latin America.

By the mid-1970s, what the world was facing was a vast education system of unprecedented capacity. It was possible to conceive of a time when 85 or 90 percent of the world's six year olds would have an opportunity to enter grade one of something resembling a school. The task of keeping them in school, and of supplying something intellectually credible for them to do when in school, however, was by no means guaranteed. But it was hopeful.
The most prominent characteristic of what happened next is that of surprise. In spite of the considerable advances in econometrics, in modelling economic performance and in predicting outputs of various kinds, no one in the economic world was able to predict the speed or the depth of the crisis following the Arab/Israeli war of 1973, the subsequent petroleum price rise, and the recycling of considerable amounts of hard currency from private banks in Europe and North America to developing countries, particularly in Africa and Latin America. Other contributing factors are relatively long standing and widely known—the gradual decline of primary product prices on which developing countries depend for exports; the gradual increase in manufactured products on which the same countries depend for imports; the continued strength of the dollar due to high levels of borrowing of the U.S. government, the continued strength of the Yen due to Japan’s continuing trade imbalance, and the propensity of many developing countries to artificially raise the value of their local currencies and fail to combat inflationary pressures. From this combination of characteristics—some due to factors that developing countries could control and to other factors that they could not—emerged an economic crisis that continues to shake the nation-state’s political foundation, threaten monetary stability, and bring into question the future of democracy and progress in the areas most deeply affected.

The Depth of the Crisis

The crisis has not affected developing countries equally. The economic impact on India and China has been comparatively modest. Malaysia—protected by petroleum price rises when the price of rubber has fallen and by rubber price rises when the price of petroleum has fallen—has, comparatively speaking, been prospering. Indonesia, Trinidad and Tobago, Gabon, Zimbabwe, the Gulf States, and of course, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong—the world economic crisis has challenged the economies of these countries but has not overwhelmed them. They are exceptions.

For the others, however, the crisis has been crippling. On the average, in 1987, low-income economies—those countries with a GNP per capita of US$480 or less—had to spend 15.7 percent of their export earnings to service their public debt.

For the average Latin American and (petroleum-importing) country in the Middle East and North Africa, the figure was about 27 percent in 1987. Of course regional averages mask individual
differences. In 1987, Burundi had to spend 38.5 percent of its export earnings on debt service; Yemen PDR had to spend 38.2 percent; Niger 33.4 percent; Colombia 33.4 percent; Argentina 45 percent; and Algeria 49 percent. What this implies is that these countries have had to contend with a new "sectoral" allocation in their national economies, an unpredicted and unintended budget category called debt service. In the latter 1980s, this new "sector" has accounted for one third or in some cases up to one half the earnings that developing countries have acquired from exporting their goods and services.

Has official assistance helped? The answer is yes, but not enough. If one looks at the balance of the payments before and after the transfer of official development assistance, it is clear that the problem has been ameliorated but not solved.

Transfers of official development assistance increased in Bangladesh from $120 million in 1970 to $657 million in 1987. But during that same time period there was a rise in public obligations and disappointments in economic performance. The balance-of-payments problem in Bangladesh actually worsened, from $-114 million in 1970 to $-309 million in 1987. Similar difficulties—despite increases in development assistance—have occurred in Kenya. There the balance of payments problem rose tenfold, from $-49 million in 1970 to $-497 million in 1987. And in Egypt where the balance of payments was $-148 million in 1970 and $-2.7 billion in 1987, an eighteen-fold increase. And in Argentina where the balance of payments problem increased from $163 million to $4.3 billion, a twenty-six-fold increase. Such balance of payment problems significantly affect the availability of a country's foreign exchange. In 1987, the average country in Latin America had only 4.7 months of foreign exchange available; the average country in East Asia only 3.9, and in Africa only 2.1.

What this implies is that the crisis is of genuinely macroeconomic proportions. It has deeply affected the average country to pay its own bills and to meet its obligations, both internal and external. The crisis has placed extraordinary pressure on countries to increase the supply of local currency and so meet obligations in the short term. But short-term solutions exacerbate the problem by further deteriorating confidence in the nation's economy, and further jeopardizing a country's ability to conduct trade. One solution has been inevitable, and obvious to all. It always includes a program of "adjustment"—sometimes manifest and in the public realm and sometimes hidden from public view but felt by effect. Such adjustments have usually included the
decline of public expenditures in one sector or another to meet the obligation of this new sector of public debt. Declines in expenditure and reductions in public authority have touched many sectors—health, agriculture, transportation, etc. This is what has occurred in the field of education.

**Effect on the Quality of Education**

Debt service has taken its toll on the percentage of government resources allocated to education. In 1972, Bangladesh allocated 14.8 percent of its central government expenditures to education; by 1986, it allocated only 9.9 percent. Malawi allocated 15 percent in 1972, and 11 percent in 1986.

In Bolivia the proportion fell from 31 percent to 11 percent; in Tunisia from 30 percent to 14 percent. On the average, the proportion of central government expenditures allocated to education dropped from 15 percent to 10 percent in the low-income countries and from 20 percent to 14 percent in the middle-income countries. During the same time period, the proportion of central government expenditures allocated to health also dropped—in low-income countries from 5 percent to 4 percent and in middle-income countries from 6 percent to 4 percent.

Military expenditures were increased during this period though. In the low-income countries military expenditures accounted for an average of 12.8 percent of the central government budgets in 1972 and 14.7 percent in 1986. In the middle-income countries the military proportion went from 9.2 percent to 12.8 percent.

In many instances unit expenditures, the monetary amount of money allocated per student, have also fallen. The average primary school student in Sub-Saharan Africa received $67 worth of educational investment in 1970 and only $52 in 1983, a drop of about 23 percent.

The average secondary school student received $362 in 1970 and $223 in 1983—a drop of 39 percent. For the average university student the drop was more precipitous still, from $4338 to $2365—about 49 percent. Out of thirty-three developing countries on which we have comparable information in 1980, twenty-one had reduced their unit primary educational expenditures by 1984.

Very divergent patterns emerge when countries are divided into three groups: low income, middle income, and industrialized.

Between 1970 and 1980, low-income countries actually reduced unit expenditures from $122 to $81 per pupil. Middle-income countries, because of some Asian countries pulling up the
average, increased per-pupil expenditures slightly from $133 to $180. Industrialized countries, however, nearly doubled unit expenditures during the same time period, from an average of $1229 to $2257. In fact, there is a widening expenditure gap among education systems. In 1960, industrialized countries were able to spend 14 times more per elementary school student than could the world’s poorest countries. By 1970, this gap increased to 22, and by 1980, to 50 times more per child. In part, this increasing gap is due to the economic ramifications of the debt crisis.

Where do budgetary reductions come from? Are they taken from parts of the sector where they will create the least educational problem? Are they taken “across the board,” from each part of the budget equally? Or are they taken from where the political reaction is most manageable? The answer is not clear, and there is no single tendency. However, there is some evidence to suggest that reductions are taken from where the political reaction is most manageable—from non-salary categories of the recurrent education budget, from expenditures on educational materials and equipment maintenance. Teachers can negotiate their part of the budget for themselves; textbooks cannot. In Africa, for instance, the percentage of the (total) education recurrent budget allocated to non-salary expenditures dropped from 7.6 percent to 4.2 percent between 1975 and 1985. In Asia it dropped from 6.3 to 3.1 percent; and in Latin America and the Caribbean it dropped more precipitously than in other regions, from 4.4 percent to 1.8 percent.

The typical state of non-salary expenditures across countries is listed below. In a country such as Bolivia, the average child in an elementary school is exposed to about US 80 cents worth of non-salary investment per year; the typical child in Malawi is exposed to about US$1.24 per year; the typical child in Malaysia about US$40 per year; while the typical child in an OECD country such as Sweden will be exposed to about US$300 per year in non-salary expenditures.

What does this mean in educational terms? If a country is able to spend only one dollar or so per child for all non-salary expenditures—chalk, blackboards, furniture, and reading materials—it implies that there is likely to be very little to read. In many parts of rural Africa, Latin America, and South Asia, one finds only one textbook per class. The teacher is expected to copy the content of that single book on the blackboard, and the children, in turn, to copy from the blackboard into their notebooks. The children then try to memorize what they have in their notebooks.
This is referred to as the "copy/copy" situation: an inadequately educated teacher, underpaid (often unpaid for months at a time), copies (often inaccurately) from a book (frequently out-dated and inappropriate to the curriculum), which gets (often inaccurately) copied into a student's notebook. That notebook then substitutes for a textbook. What kind of learning does this yield? It results in the rote memorization of poorly understood information, often with large gaps in logic, of out-of-date facts and interpretations with little or no explanation as to how or why. That is the basic engine of education in many of the least-developed countries, and the typical education millions of children receive.

If a country (or its citizens) can spend about three dollars per child, the situation improves greatly. It can then perhaps afford one book per child per year for each subject. China is a good illustration. Every year, each child in China receives a new book in each subject, including one book in arithmetic, one in geometry, and one in history. This constitutes an enormous improvement. But often the books are of poor quality. They may be so poorly bound that they come apart before the end of the school year. A map of Asia may show countries and names in the wrong place. An anatomy drawing may be barely legible. Thus, in spite of the fact that one pupil per book constitutes a revolution in information available, the quality of the information provided may be problematic.

If a country can afford to spend US$40 per child in non-salary inputs it has progressed so far that it can provide half a dozen titles in every subject. This makes it possible for a teacher to assign different books with different levels of difficulty to different children in the same class. In such a situation the teacher becomes an organizer of information instead of merely an explainer of facts. The teacher may now see that a child has a particular problem in arithmetic and can choose the right book to fit that problem. This entails a revolution in teacher training and in expectations about what teachers should do. Yet it is a necessary step in the ladder of educational quality.

The quality of education in many OECD countries is not ideal. Each has its problems—of motivation, curriculum rigidity, managerial mediocrity. But it is also true that large amounts of learning takes place with children at widely divergent ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. The typical OECD country can spend about US$300 per pupil per year in non-salary inputs. In Sweden, Norway, and Japan, there are often more than fifteen titles of supplementary readers available in any subject. In the United States US$6 is spent per year on each elementary school pupil in
library reading materials—in addition to the money for textbooks and in class supplementary readers. This constitutes about an 80 percent increase between 1973 and 1985. Moreover, in Japan, color television sets, in-school broadcasting equipment, and tape recorders are normally available in every classroom. Teachers are not expected anymore to teach from a single textbook in situations such as these, nor even from several textbooks. Instead teachers present information from a wide variety of sources: ditto sheets manufactured and designed in the school itself, film strips, computer programs, library study, or field projects. These sources of information yield self-generated learning so that a student may know how to research information in libraries by him/herself, and can denote the difference between a strong and a weak argument. It may very well be true that there are problems of the quality of education in OECD countries, but it is also fair to say that these problems are often different from those in the developing countries. In the developing countries the problems are largely fiscal—there simply are not enough resources to adequately finance the quality of education. In the OECD countries, the origin of the problem is not an inadequate level of resources, but inadequate motivation to utilize them effectively. The question for developing countries remains: what is to be done? How can developing countries make up for the inadequate resource base? How can they limit the decline in the quality of their education systems? How can they afford the quality of education that they themselves expect?

**Adjustment Choices**

The term “adjustment” can be misleading. To the inexperienced, it might imply something benign, as though any change is not politically risky. To be sure, there are circumstances in which the change constitutes improvement without risk. Installing management information systems (MIS) is an example. Curriculum and teacher training improvements are others. They may be needed in Education Sectors, but these should not be confused with an adjustment.

Adjustment implies a change in lieu of the financial crisis. There are three separate kinds of adjustment, based upon the degree of: (1) conscious intent, (2) the role of external institutions, and (3) targeting.

Conscious Intent. Some countries have realized that fiscal solvency of education is not possible—that decline is inevitable. Their choice is either to control the decline so that it will not cripple the most crucial educational elements, or to not control the decline, but rather to curse its origins. Countries that have chosen to control the decline have adjusted with conscious intent. Countries that have not been able to marshall the necessary political consensus to control the decline have adjusted anyway, but the decline’s direction has not been managed. Ghana is an example of the former; Zambia of the latter.

External Institutional Role. Those countries that choose to adjust with conscious intent can sometimes use external institutions to assist in identifying the policy choices and perhaps relieving the fiscal burden by borrowing resources; or they can marshall the necessary political will internally without the use of external institutions. Morocco tried to implement a program of higher education fees in the context of a World Bank loan; Sudan and Nigeria chose to implement similar programs without World Bank involvement. The point is that external agencies are not necessarily participants in the implementation of conscious adjustment policies.

Targeting. Whether or not external agencies are involved, all countries that consciously choose to implement adjustment policies have an additional choice of the degree of targeting within those policies. In some instances prices are raised across the board—for pharmaceuticals, or grain, or textbooks—without regard to the level of affordability to the user. In other instances a great deal of attention is paid to “protecting” the poorest of the poor, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Where higher education fees are raised, sometimes the change is associated with loan schemes and subsidized interest rates for those from impoverished families. The key is that adjustment policies may not affect all sections of a population equally; in instances where targeting is successful, the adjustment may affect the wealthy more adversely than the poor.

Have the poor been adversely affected by adjustment? By and large yes. It would be hard to argue that in an era of declining budgetary allocations in education and health, especially primary education and primary health care, that the poor have not been adversely affected. But it is not true to say that all adjustments have adversely affected the poor, or that all adjustments are the result of external agencies such as the World Bank and the IMF, or that countries which did not consciously choose to manage their adjustment process fared better than those which did. Cal-
ling for a halt in adjustment because they adversely affect the poor, without differentiating among the three types of adjustment, is unprofessional. It over-simplifies the problem, and makes it more difficult to reach political consensus, the single most important element for a solution.

**Adjustment Options**

There are four basic types of (conscious) adjustments in the Education Sector: (1) those intended to increase resources, (2) those intended to improve the use of current resources, (3) those which may generate quantum leaps in efficiency with modest new investment, and (4) those intended to reduce costs by means of retrenchment (i.e., of doing less).

**Increasing Resources.** Like any other public good, Education Sectors perform a wide variety of functions, some with very high externalities such as primary education; others with significant elements of private gain and private concern. The key issue in raising additional resources for education is the degree to which a sector is willing to capitalize on private demand. This may require the questioning of long-held assumptions about the nature of the Education Sector and its traditions. To what extent should it be absolutely free of private cost? Should the provision of any skill to any person be free of private cost? Should the public sector be solely in charge of educational provision, or should some skills or educational equipment and reading material be provided or manufactured by non-governmental institutions? Should these institutions be profit-making?

For instance, communities may be quite willing to finance specific educational expenditures if given managerial authority over their use. Students and their families may be willing to pay fees if the resources are used to improve the school's library or laboratory equipment. In instances where fees cannot be raised because of political objections, the private cost might be raised in other ways—by programs of national service, public sector bonding and the like. In some instances the functions of the schools may be better provided by non-education sector authorities. Sports and community service may be better provided by churches and other community organizations; vocational skills may be more efficiently provided by industries or, in the cases where the skills taught are specific to an individual firm, perhaps they may be provided by the firm itself rather than the public. The public role need not be identical across all parts of the education sector. Key to the debate is being able to achieve consensus on the differentiation between those sectoral elements which require public con-
from those which require public control and financing, and
from those which require public control, public financing, and
public provision.

Improving the Efficiency of Current Resources. Education Sectors
in developing countries are resource poor, but they can also be
inefficient. In many instances, current resources are allocated
more on the basis of precedent than on the basis of efficiency.
Teachers are paid according to how much education and
pedagogical training they received prior to entering the teaching
force and according to how long they have been teaching. There
are very few ways to reward teachers on the basis of performance
or scarcity of their subject knowledge. Governmental authorities,
particularly in federal systems—India, Indonesia, Brazil, Nigeria,
etc.—assist local authorities in financing specific elements within
the Education Sector. Increasingly common now is that the basis
for this financing is associated with managerial incentives, such
as matching grant performance. Selection examinations are being
used as feedback mechanisms to improve pedagogical perform-
ance within classrooms; teachers and administrators seem to re-
spond more quickly to examination feedback information than to
curriculum reforms—because the incentive to perform well on
examinations is higher than the more generalized nature of cur-
riculum change. Another category of efficiencies has to do with
time allocation—within the classroom, the school, and the school
year. Some reforms may require increasing the school calendar;
others in fact may require lowering the number of hours and
increasing the “time-on-task.” Some changes may require a ques-
tioning of the school day—should a school have two shifts, or
three? Should one teachers be expected to teach all subjects, or
should some teachers be expected to specialize? And if teachers
are expected to specialize, can they be paid differently?

Regardless of how they may appear, these are not neutral
reforms. Each requires a questioning of long-held precedents.
Each requires the full cooperation of teacher associations, of par-
ent and community organizations, and in some cases of churches
and other non-governmental organizations that have educational
functions. Such consensus is neither simple nor cost free. Success
depends on the degree to which these groups see their future as
being improved with the rationality of their own commitment,
and in certain cases, their own sacrifice.

Cost Efficiencies. Some adjustment options require new invest-
ments at the expense of something else, on grounds that the po-
tential for large increases in achievement cannot be ignored.
Perhaps the most well known example is the proportion of the
current budget being allocated to textbooks and other reading
materials versus the proportion allocated to salary expenditures. Even in those instances where the salaries of teachers are too low; even in instances in which teachers have not been paid for many months because of currency scarcity, it may still be sensible to "protect" that portion of the budget allocated to non-salary expenditures. A school without reading materials is so inefficient and ineffective as a public investment that almost nothing justifies its continuation. Therefore, raising the proportion of the current budget allocated to non-salary expenditures can be an effective tool. What proportion is ideal? One can only guess, but 5 percent is probably a minimum. Where recurrent allocations (from public and private sources taken together) are below 5 percent, the Education Sector is likely to be in serious danger of atrophy.

Retrenchment. Functions in the Education Sector often were acquired as a result of unchecked ambition in the 1960s or of unquestioned pedagogy. Financial crisis requires a questioning of both. Does a public education need to have science, math, foreign language, agriculture, sports, history, commerce, local language equally? Are all parts of the curriculum equally important? Can some be eliminated or delayed or taught to a few rather than to all? In the face of crisis some countries are asking these questions and deciding that the basic skills—math, science, and languages—are more important than prevocational subjects. Some are questioning the need for laboratories to teach hands-on science or manipulative skills. Some are asking whether it is more important to have teachers with pedagogical training (and therefore higher pay) or teachers with higher levels of subject matter who learn teaching skills on the job (and therefore teach with greater effectiveness but at a lower cost). In some instances the whole sub-sector of formal preservice teacher training may be expendable.

Some are asking the degree to which the public sector should be responsible for the provision of skills specific to a firm or an industry. In each of these instances, what is being raised is the question of what is appropriate for the public sector to provide and finance under the current fiscal circumstances. It is not in doubt that prevocational skills are worth learning, or that science laboratories in junior secondary schools aren't worth having. What is in doubt is whether they are top priority under the circumstances. Where they are not they can be excised from public responsibility. That is retrenchment.

Lessons

Common Concerns Across Categories of Countries. In the 1960s, it was popular to believe that education was a local endeavor; that it was heavily influenced by local culture and by local political
objectives. To a large extent this was correct. But since the 1960s, we have learned that there are also universalistic issues and dilemmas in the field of education, characteristics which transcend country categories, which are every bit as pressing and as interesting in Mali as in Minnesota—diversification of finance in higher education, reform of selection examinations and standardized testing, the question of who should pay for specific skills: the public community, the industry, or the individual; what subject matter is essential and what is not; how to get good teaching to be well paid; how to instill local school management without overburdening the system, creating new inequities and without abrogating the civic nature of educational objectives. These are genuinely international issues. They are of concern as much in OECD environments as in the developing countries.

**Common Experiences.** Because many of these problems are common across wide varieties of countries, the experiences in solving them are too. This implies that there has been a major revolution in the nature of the education profession. In many ways OECD countries have been insulated from utilizing lessons originating in developing countries because of the differences in resource constraints, and types of challenges. But this is an era of major managerial reforms in developing countries, and the educational leadership is becoming increasingly articulate and professional. On some issues, moreover, there may now be more reform experience in developing countries than in OECD countries. There may be more activity in higher education financial reform in French-speaking Africa than in France; more experience with fiscal incentives in Brazil than in Britain. The value of these lessons is becoming increasingly evident. The future suggests that there will be fewer and fewer differences between OECD and developing countries in the nature of their managerial concerns in education, and the lessons are likely to be increasingly shared across country categories.

**Future Prospects for Developing Countries.** This is a unique time in the history of education. Never before has mankind created a system in which it may be possible to “educate” everybody. A skeleton of this system exists but is in danger of precipitously collapsing as a result of debt and the concomitant fiscal crisis. On the other hand education officials are learning from this experience and in many ways are becoming more professional than they would have, had they not been faced with such draconian challenges. Education Sector management may never return to what it was prior to 1974. It may never again justify itself on the basis of “needs” alone without paying equal attention to efficiency and the nature of evidence which is implied by efficiency—attention
for the first time to unit expenditures, to the patterns of academic achievement and to performance in the labor market. Moreover, the imperative for these changes is not dependent upon political ideology; interest in reform is no more characteristic of market economies than it is of centrally planned economies. Efficiency and its policy requirements are now universal goals. Moreover, though the level of resources may ebb and flow, there will never be a time when, given the ambition for universal coverage and high quality, that sufficient resources will be available. Professionalism will be permanent because it is widely realized that scarcity will be permanent.

But what should “we” do about those countries that have made such significant efforts to adjust, which by all accounts have taken political risks to change policies in appropriate directions, but are still faced with systematic educational decline? What should we do in those situations where they have done their best, and the best is not enough? Should we allow a system of primary education to sink into the sand as though it never existed?

Perhaps not. Perhaps there is virtue in reviving what all sides would agree is a “basic” education. Perhaps one should consider basic education a “world good.” Literacy and numeracy, after all, have externalities for countries far beyond the borders of say Mali, or India, or Bolivia. The United States learned that lesson many decades ago by noting the problems of having an unskilled labor force migrating from one part of the country to another, and even though the purposes of schooling remain essentially a local issue, central authorities have a stake in guaranteeing a safety net below which no local education system can sink. Precedent for countries taxing themselves for a non-national objective can be found in the field of health and environment. The question is whether basic education at its most minimum level, say three years of primary school, and equipped with a textbook for each pupil, is a category of human welfare which should be guaranteed. Is illiteracy and innumeracy like smallpox? Is it something the world can stamp out if there were sufficient consensus that such an effort was worth it?

Given the significant levels of education professionalism developed over the last decade or two, and given that in some instances countries have “adjusted” enough, it might be worthwhile considering a new foreign aid fund to support basic education. Results of recent research into the efficacy of primary education support that it is reasonable to assume that the product would be worth the investment. And given the significant level of managerial improvement in the recent past, it is also reasonable to believe that new foreign aid resources would be effectively utilized.