

14 Aid for Education

Rudolph Goodridge and Bevis Peters

The issue of educational aid to small nation states in the Commonwealth is considered by Rudolph Goodridge and Bevis Peters. Attention is concentrated on some of the advantages derived from educational aid, the problems which are inherent in current aid programmes and processes, and ways by which aid could have a more meaningful part to play in the long-term development of education in small states. In particular it is suggested that support is needed to assist small states develop their own long-term research, planning and policy development capabilities.

The context

There is considerable variation in the educational problems and needs of small states. Whilst united in 'smallness' it cannot be assumed that their educational requirements are identical. There is a great variability in their patterns of educational provision. Some countries have compulsory primary education; others have low primary school enrolments. Some small states have a high transition rate from primary to secondary schools while for others the rate is very low. The same is true of those proceeding to tertiary education.

There are considerable differences too in the percentage of government expenditure devoted to education. As for most education

systems the bulk of expenditure goes on teachers' salaries, but the cost of general administration tends to be relatively high, often taking second place in the educational budget. In some small countries such as the Solomon Islands and Brunei, the second highest item of educational expenditure is on scholarships. These two states spend 11.1 per cent and 16.7 per cent respectively on scholarship awards.

There is also considerable diversity in the manner in which government expenditure is allocated between the different levels of the educational system. For example, expenditure on primary education takes 30 per cent of the educational budget in Malta and 48 per cent in Gambia. At the secondary level the percentage varies from 12 per cent in the Solomon Islands to over 44 per cent in Brunei, while at the tertiary level the figure ranges from 6.1 per cent in Gambia to 21 per cent in Malta.

The factors briefly outlined above indicate that the external aid small states are likely to seek for their education systems will vary considerably. Each nation develops its own list of priorities for which assistance is sought. Nevertheless, despite this variability one common characteristic is that all these countries put a high priority on education. They, like other societies, seek to make the education they offer more relevant and responsive to their socio-economic development needs and national priorities, but the constraint which their size imposes often makes their response more difficult. They are often unable to meet challenges because of their limited resources and a lack of trained manpower, a problem which is especially marked in the field of technical and vocational education. Further when they seek external assistance they have the additional challenge that the aid offered, both in terms of materials and personnel, is not always that which is most relevant to their long term development needs. This is particularly difficult since most of the materials which are offered in an aid package are not usually devised with the particular needs of small nation states in mind, and the personnel who come out to assist often have little or no experience of working in these types of societies. As a result they often end up treating small states as if they were merely large states, writ small.

Most small nations tend to have a very limited economic base and a small population. This makes it difficult to provide locally a full range of educational opportunities and services which may be needed in order fully to develop their human resources and manpower requirements. In turn this is likely to make small states highly dependent on outside sources for educational assistance with the problems which are likely to accompany this dependency. Great care is necessary to ensure that any educational project for which aid is being sought will be cost-effective. While the capital cost of a project might be met from an external source the recurrent cost has to be found locally. Therefore in any educational project attention must be focused not only on the size of the external aid packet but also on the long term financial commitment which this is likely to have on the recurrent budget of the country.

Geographic dispersion, especially in the case of archipelagic nations, together with relative isolation, provides major challenges for small countries in their attempt to meet local educational needs. This in turn is likely to increase the tendency of small states to seek external assistance, especially if efforts to meet isolated learners utilise modern communication technology.

The fact that these nations are so small and yet enjoy political independence is likely to increase the desire of larger nations to seek a diplomatic quid pro quo for any help that they might offer. This increases their vulnerability to external forces and the agencies of the more powerful nation states, as well as large international organisations.

Some positive aspects of educational aid

Small states have undoubtedly benefited from the use of external assistance in a number of important ways. Through the use of capital grants and loans, countries have been able to promote increased access to education and training opportunities, a development priority. Assistance has helped to finance the construction and

refurbishment of schools and other training institutions, and to equip them with educational technology and materials; critical inputs in enhancing the quality of the teaching-learning process.

It is also true that small states have benefited significantly from fellowship and scholarship schemes, which allow their nationals to study abroad, within or beyond their region, for short-term or extended periods. This helps reduce the need to build expensive, specialised training facilities in each country. Where such schemes are pursued in regional, sub-regional or selected national institutions located in small states, the resource benefits derived can be a key source of support for further indigenous institutional development and expansion.

Small states, by availing themselves of technical assistance in its various forms (consultants, advisers, specialist teachers, teacher trainers, curriculum developers and so on), are also able to pursue needed reforms in their educational systems. Technical assistance, when used wisely and prudently, can also be of much benefit in the development and improvement of administrative structures and procedures. Such initiatives in turn can have the benefit of increasing efficiency and improving cost-effectiveness.

Another area in which aid has offered much benefit is as an instrument of regional integration and collaboration. A case in point is the UWI/USAID Primary Education Project in the Caribbean. Formal agreements were entered into in 1979 by the University of the West Indies (UWI), the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC), the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) and USAID to design and implement a project on a regional scale.

Curriculum reforms and guides, teaching aids and materials development, training of teachers and educational managers, and improved physical facilities, were some of the key objectives in this collaborative effort. It is to the credit of all the actors involved in this process that the project was deemed a major success (Project Evaluation Report: 1985). Perhaps in the future this is the kind of model that small countries will need to consider in the interest of maximising the potential benefits of external aid from a variety of aid

sources. The point made in the report of the Commonwealth Experts Meeting in Mauritius in November 1985 about the importance of promoting regional co-operation as one means of overcoming the constraints of smallness is worth underlining here:

Regional co-operation in provision of education services offers possibilities of establishing courses closer to home when the domestic system on its own is not sufficiently large to justify course provision, or the establishment of services like examinations. Many regional co-operation arrangements are already being established in different parts of the Commonwealth, involving shared universities and other institutions, examinations and assessment bodies, consultative organisations and the like.¹

Problems

It is, however, true to say that despite the significant benefits to education that can be attributed to aid, the process is not without its problems. One of the recurring concerns is the apparent absence of co-ordinated frameworks for channelling aid within countries, among countries and among aid agencies. Judging from the experience of small states, this problem is most noticeable in the area of non-formal education and training.

In the Caribbean region, for example, it is not unusual to find at any one period of time, within any country, several training activities, catering to a clientele with essentially the same training needs and aspirations. These activities may be found operating with different values, under different local, regional, sub-regional or extra-regional sponsorship, but aiming to achieve the same basic purposes. Concern over this general state of affairs has been raised by both aid donors and recipients, but until all actors involved in the planning and implementation of aid projects are prepared to give it the urgent attention it requires, the resource wastage and duplication of effort

which have been well documented are likely to continue in the future.

Another problem area relates to the way in which aid projects are negotiated and managed. Aid agency administrative policies, their procedures and accountability mechanisms can pose major obstacles to an effective aid process. One way in which this has been clearly manifested is in the case where the recipient country is expected to make a local contribution (in-kind costs) towards the total cost of an aid package. This local contribution can at times be sufficiently large to create an added burden on the already constrained resources of small states. The need for a review of this requirement is particularly acute, especially in light of the fact that the reason for requesting aid in the first place was to ease the burden of the costs borne by the country.

Closely related are the conditions tied to aid. One such condition is the requirement that a stipulated proportion of the total value of capital grants - up to 90 per cent in some cases, must be spent in the home country of the donor agency. Such rigid stipulations have been known not only to make the real value of aid to the host country minimal, but it is also not unusual to find that the materials, equipment and supplies bought from outside are either inappropriate to local environmental conditions, or relatively costly to maintain.

Another pertinent point is that there is an undue fixation with the operational or programmatic aspects of educational systems. Aid projects seem, for the most part, to have ignored that level of the system where important strategic policy decisions are formulated. This is not meant to imply that external advisors and experts should be involved in, or should be perceived to be influencing, policy level decisions and priorities. Rather it is that the aid process should be of sufficient flexibility to allow movement beyond the level of operational and technical concerns, to permit small states to use these resources more strategically, and generally to allow them much wider scope whereby they can address some of the more fundamental problems facing their education systems.

Needs

In considering the prospects of aid for education to small states, it is important to view aid not only in terms of its amount, adequacy and appropriateness to educational programmes, methods and operations, but also to its impact on, and the extent to which it enables small states to develop their capacity to address some of the more fundamental concerns in education and educational development. Inquiry, by small states themselves, into genuine and fundamental questions about the role of education, its mission, and the strategies necessary to bring about directed change is vital to their own self-reliance. It is on this basis that the long-term viability of their education systems rests.

Further, aid projects will need to be judged as to how they facilitate wider involvement of the various constituencies who give effect to, or are affected by the educational development process – policy-makers, administrators, teachers, students, parents, special interest organisations and so on. These key actors must not only be afforded the opportunity to give full expression as to where they think their education systems should be going in the future; they must also be strategically placed within the education decision-making process so as to give wider legitimacy to the initiatives proposed and to their implementation.

These are the elements of a strategic planning process; a decision-making process which when applied to social organisations, such as education, requires the organisation to look beyond its internal environment (programmes and operations) and to focus as well on the social, political and economic forces external to it, and which influence its development and growth. It also permits the organisation to reassess its own strengths and opportunities as it seeks to bring about planned changes. This is the kind of background and orientation against which the future qualitative contributions of aid should be judged.

Aid will also have to be judged on the extent to which it has helped small states advance from a condition of dependence to one of more independence. There is a strong case for a greater part of aid to be diverted from the functional or operational levels of education systems, and to be allocated towards the development and/or strengthening of educational decision-making processes and systems. Through such an approach, small states will then be able to develop their own capacity for strategic planning, as well as the tools necessary to diagnose their own problems, and to design and implement strategies which are truly their own.

The promotion of greater interdependence of small states will also require the allocation of more aid resources for the development of more effective collaborative processes and mechanisms. In this regard, what may be needed is an approach that permits a number of aid organisations to pool resources to attack interrelated problems faced by small states. There is certainly a case here for resources resulting from bilateral arrangements to be pooled. There is also a case for the pooling of personnel resources from sub-regions to provide technical assistance. Further, agencies must begin to make a special effort to share the results of education surveys, findings of special project missions, of needs assessment studies and so on with member states of a particular region. For it is by such approaches that the leadership of education systems can develop a greater appreciation of needs, issues and responses.

A need is also seen for a greater proportion of aid to education to be more flexible, diversified and long-term in nature. This will not only require modifications in the conception of aid projects and how they are managed, but also arrangements and procedures for the commencement and termination of projects will have to be reassessed. Administrative and financial mechanisms to ensure continuity of projects in small states - where these prove warranted - will need to be devised. And built-in processes for wider regional diffusion of the results of aid projects must be viewed as essential components of such projects.

Beyond this, aid giving and receiving should be viewed for what it is - a process - rather than a mechanistic, static tool for dispensing funds, materials and personnel. The aid process should be seen as a dynamic one operating in partnership with, and integrated where possible with, the development processes of small countries. It must be seen as a process in which stronger collaborative relationships among aid agencies themselves is required if small countries are to exploit fully the opportunities available to them.

More importantly, it must be viewed as a process through which small states can significantly overcome their constraints of small size and move towards the ultimate aim of aid - which, it is agreed, is to reduce their dependence on external assistance.

Conclusion

Education is a continuous life-long activity. It follows that education must be perceived as a pervasive factor in the development process and well integrated, horizontally and vertically, into all development efforts. Moreover, whatever is done in the name of development, the ultimate aim should be to promote self-reliance, reduce dependence and decrease the vulnerability of individuals, families and the country as a whole.

The quality of education in small developing states should be seen as important as matters of quantity and scale. It is necessary to explore a variety of learning methods, to carry out experimentation and research in techniques and methods of educational reform, and to promote their widest diffusion where and when it is proven necessary. These are some of the priority areas to which aid agencies must give their attention.

Finally, education decision-makers and managers in small states must acknowledge that reforms imposed from the top have a poor record. What needs to be promoted, therefore, is wider popular participation in the study of educational issues and in the planning of reforms. The development and use of local and regional expertise and leadership in the management of educational systems is of critical

importance in this regard. The training of education leaders and managers to develop a sound knowledge and the skills to perform the multifaceted roles necessary to perform in the milieu of small states is therefore deserving of the highest attention.

Considered in this context, it follows that small states must become more self-reliant and less dependent on others in designing their own development plans, in devising planning strategies, and in the development and use of appropriate indigenous processes, methods, technologies and local expertise. They must also have the capacity to evolve, test and implement their own concepts and educational reforms. The area of vocational and technical education is a prime candidate here. The ability of small states of the Commonwealth to evolve their own concept of institutional development must be encouraged and nurtured. So too is the need for assisting them in devising the kind of co-operative relationships and arrangements that will foster interdependence.

This then is the framework that should inform the future orientation of aid, its focus, and its management processes. If educational aid is to impact beneficially on educational development in small countries aid agencies, as well as the states receiving aid, must begin to address these challenges jointly.

Reference

- 1 Commonwealth Secretariat (1986), *Educational Development: The Small States of the Commonwealth*, Report of a Pan-Commonwealth Experts Meeting, Mauritius 1985 (p.5)