

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Medjomo Coulibaly, Association for the Development of Education in Africa.** *Policies, Procedures and Strategies for the Allocation of Resources for Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review of the Literature (Bellagio Studies in Publishing, 4, 4).* Paris: Association for the Development of Education in Africa, 1999. 80 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-2-86978-085-9.

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This review is an excellent example of “go and get it” research. It is useful, relatively comprehensive (in other words meeting the research brief), but not thought-provoking and surely not a source of inspiration to aspiring or reigning experts in the field. With the increasing commodification of research, we will see much more like this. Broad reflective surveys have become an unaffordable luxury. The mantra is “focus, focus, focus.” Having made this point, let me put it aside and go about my “core business”, examining the contents of this work. Then I will return to the grander issues.

Funded by the usual suspects (CIDA, USAID), this study presents a thematically structured overview of writings on the financial management of education. The chapter headings are the key areas of concern of those who during the last decade have sought the turnaround in education in Africa via financial restructuring. These headings include: budgetary processes, foreign aid financing, controlling unit costs, and sourcing of private funding. Typical of those who adopt a technicist approach to solving educational problems, the authors, who are members of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa’s Working Group on Finance and Education, claim to have “attempted to steer clear of controversy and conflicting paradigms and focus on what is essential for an understanding of the multiple and inextricable problems that persist and grow from day to day” (p. 2).

The major literature covered in this volume consists of large-scale cross country studies funded by multilateral agencies such as *Education for All: Achieving the Goal* – a joint 1996 effort by the World Bank, UNESCO, UNDP, and UNICEF, a number of studies commissioned

by these four agencies, plus others from the International Institute for Educational Planning, and the Economics of Education Research Unit. While the works of other authors are often footnoted, they are given little attention in the text. Because the authors are both familiar with the literature from the multilateral agencies and steeped in the broad paradigm which informs such work, the review does present a reasonable summary of this subset of the literature on finance and education.

The results of such studies have much information to offer. For example, the prevalence of incremental budgeting in most education ministries is a genuine source of concern. Under incremental budgeting, next year’s allocation is a percentage change of the present year’s spending. With a fixed percentage and a spreadsheet, such a budget can be completed in a very short time. The problem is, of course, that with the sort of financial crisis being experienced by most African Ministries of Education, more fundamental reprioritisation and impact assessment need to be done. Moreover, the authors point out that education budgets are typically driven by Ministers of Finance, with even education authorities having little input (let alone other constituencies). In a period when the income of African states is unpredictable, due to fluctuations in currency values and world commodity prices, the income stream to education becomes a bit of a lottery draw – hardly a recipe for successful long-term planning. The writers’ solution to this is three fold. Firstly, they call for scrapping incremental budgeting and going back to the drawing board by examining each and every line item. Secondly, they argue for “loosening the constraints that hamper the organisational operation of the budget” (p. 23). This means reducing the control by

the Ministries of Finance and bringing other stakeholders into allocation decisions. Lastly, they urge a move away from total reliance on the fiscus and moving toward a more active contribution from private sources through user fees and private sector delivery.

While supporting their arguments with a reasonably broad spectrum of case study evidence, there is really nothing new here. In essence, the volume points us to the source documents which have informed much of the current wisdom in African finance and education today: the problem is inefficiency in state ministries, the solution is tighter management and a bigger role for the private sector. For those who want a tidy summary and introduction to the original sources of these notions, this review may be useful.

The shortcoming of the review is that it avoids the big issues. Maybe this is the fault of the authors, perhaps they had a very constraining brief. But their stated aims of avoiding controversy and conflicting paradigms are quite disturbing for those who view financial management as something more than a set of technical skills. Moreover, in denying any concern with different approaches, the authors by default accept the dominant, market-driven orientation of institutions like the World Bank and USAID.

This leads us back to my opening point. The best of literature reviews do not merely summarise one perspective but rather incite interest in a critical topic by highlighting the key debates, past and present. As a result, at least two very key debates on this topic are marginalised and a third is not even raised. The first and most important is the impact of structural adjustment on education financing. While SAPs get an occasional mention by the authors, there is a distinct aversion to highlighting any studies which place economic restructuring, not financial management, at the heart of the current battles that most African Ministries of Education face. Writers such as Joel Samoff, Birgit Brock-Utne, and Claudia Buchmann have made the point that an effective education system does not only rely on systems and infrastructure. They place the financial crisis in a wider context, arguing that, for example, if teachers and students cannot make basic ends meet, they will not be able to focus on education. When declining standards of living become a continental phenomenon, perhaps improved management systems can

make an impact, but they cannot actually solve the problem. Secondly, although the authors do note that there is a distinct lack of large-scale studies carried out by African researchers, they provide no clear explanation of why this is the case.

Surely this is linked directly to the crisis of education within which their literature review is situated, that African researchers and tertiary institutions lack the resources and the political influence to leverage the funding required to both carry out and publish such work. For example, there are local academic journals such as Zimbabwe Journal of Education Research or South Africa's Perspectives in Education. Over the years, these publications have delivered some excellent pieces of work. Yet the journals themselves battle to survive financially. The impact of their articles is limited, particularly in the spheres where money for research is delivered. Ultimately, those who author pieces in such journals are forced to join a team funded externally if they want to conduct research on any scale. But the narrow range of funding sources often leads to reproduction of the conventional wisdom, rather than innovation and, in particular, the development of Africa-based paradigms.

Lastly, the volume does not address the debate over the links between education, the economy and development. For the authors, education means skills for the job market and students are human capital waiting to be grown. But how do we assess the impact of education in Africa? Is the current economic crisis the result of inappropriate skills matches and misdirected aid? Or is the role of education more limited and dependent than those with elaborate financial management packages would like to admit? These are big questions which, while not the focus of such a review of literature, should have informed the approach of the authors.

However, since Conhye and Coulibaly have chosen to avoid these mega-debates, I can commend them for having systematically searched their data bases and produced a helpful bibliography, but lament that they have done little to light the spark that drives critical thinking researchers to new heights.

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