

The Evaluation of International Cooperation in Education: A Rural Perspective

David Atchoarena

International Institute for Educational Planning

Abstract

Rural issues have largely been overlooked in development aid, including aid to education. Yet, the vast majority of the poor live in rural areas. The recognition of this wide gap between the urban bias of development interventions and the rural character of many education and poverty challenges requires adopting a new perspective to analyze education issues in developing countries and to evaluate the results of international and national development efforts. This paper presents the case for adopting a “rural lens” when analyzing education issues in countries where the majority of the population lives in rural areas. This paper examines conceptual and practical implications for the evaluation of ‘rural-sensitive’ education. It presents the Education for Rural People (ERP) flagship initiative as an illustration of a creative scheme to mobilize the international community around a rural agenda for education.

Rurality and Education

For many years, rural areas have been the “stepchild” of international cooperation which has largely failed to adequately identify and address conditions specific to them (UNESCO 2004a). This attitude of the international community has been reflected in the diminishing attention devoted to rural development and in the decreasing flows of aid to agriculture.

This lack of interest for rural areas has also been felt in education. Agricultural education is no longer a priority and rurality is not recognized as a meaningful dimension to understand and respond to EFA challenges of developing countries, regardless of the fact that, in most of them, the majority of the population lives in rural areas. It seems that the international community is unable to shed or even recognize its urban biases.

Of course, this does not mean that no attention is paid to rural schools. In developing countries, a large number of studies are conducted in a rural context. However in these studies there is no explicit intent to explain how rurality influences some aspects of education. Such studies have occurred only incidentally in rural contexts. In development aid, a large share of education support benefits the rural communities, but this inclination does not recognize the specificities of the rural issue. Yet, rural schools enroll a disproportionately large share of the children from poor families and minority groups. As a result, they face a unique set of challenges, including those due to their geographic isolation.

Another approach consists in specifically studying rural education issues. Such an

approach could be classified as “rural specific.” Moreover, rurality, when considered, is only seen as a problem; little literature attempts to assess rural communities in terms of their assets. Common perceptions virtually equate rural areas with educational deficiency and poverty.

The majority of the world population is rural, a total of 3.2 billion persons in 2005. This is 50.8 percent of the total population (United Nations 2004). The rural population represents 70 percent of the world poor and 72 percent of the population in the least developed countries. Despite urbanization, this situation is not going to change drastically by 2015; the percentage of rural people in least developed countries will then be 66.6 percent of the total population. The fight against poverty in the coming decade, therefore, needs to take such data into account.

In this context, the lack of comprehensive data on the particular features of education in rural areas prevents both the national governments and the international community to draw meaningful lessons from contemporary education reforms. Intensive efforts should be made to overcome the problems of geographic isolation, poverty, multi-linguism, inadequate financial resources, and other impediments to the educational success of children residing in rural areas.

This situation is detrimental to educational progress in rural areas. But it is unfortunate for all, because educational innovations often take place in rural areas. Multi-grade teaching, school-community partnerships, flexible learning, contextualization of learning, use of the mother tongue as the language of instruction, and community-based early childhood development are examples of educational change that emerged from rural experiences.

The lack of adequate information on rural areas affects the evaluation process of both the governments and donors. As a result, it is often difficult to know the effect of external support on rural schools’ effectiveness or whether the educational needs of rural people are being equitably dealt with. Unless this challenge is addressed, meeting the goals defined by the international community will be impeded.

Providing Education for All (EFA) in the low-income countries is clearly a task for which external assistance is badly needed (Atchoarena & Gasperini 2003). Basic education in rural areas could be funded as a component of rural development or as part of the education and training sector. Unfortunately, it has received inadequate donor attention either way. With some exceptions, aid allocated for the development of education has not brought major changes in poverty-stricken rural areas. This may partly be due to the shift in recent years from project funding to program or sectoral support, which leaves the decisions on specific allocations largely to the recipient governments, often driven by an urban bias.

Besides the level of the investment in education for rural areas, there are other concerns related to the effectiveness of aid mechanisms. The principal procedure used to deliver support to basic education changed over the years. The financing and implementation of projects have long been the dominant mode of donors’ intervention. In recent years, agencies have opted for a more integrated method through Sector-Wide Approaches (SWAp). The SWAp model pays greater attention to the integration of agency and government and seeks to achieve

improved co-ordination among development partners. Focused on outcomes and strategies, it involves less earmarking of agency funds.

In education, SWAps are expected to improve the policy, budgetary and institutional context in which services are delivered. Eventually, this should lead to enhanced education efficiency, effectiveness and quality. However, the potential benefits of SWAps for rural development are not as clear. Contrary to education, rural development is not a sector and does not fall under the responsibility of a line ministry. Although the latest developments reflect the emergence of direct budgetary support, there are fears that emphasis on sector-based mechanisms of inter-donor coordination and development funds allocation may result in an inadequate consideration for rural development. Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) may provide the channel to overcome this risk.

Defining Rural

It is sometimes argued that the problem is not due to an urban bias but rather to the difficulty of defining rurality. It is fair to recognize that donors, policy makers and researchers frequently do not agree on what constitutes rurality. Census typically defines “rural” as a residual category of places “outside urbanized areas.” Small scale, isolation, scarcity of population and poverty are some of the variables often associated with rural.

The multiple definitions of “rural” used in official statistics, policy documents and research reports do not facilitate the analysis of rural issues and the evaluation of the impact of education support to rural schools and learners. At the international level, the lack of a common, consistent, and explicit definition of “rural” makes it difficult, if not impossible, to compare results among the studies conducted on any particular rural issue. Until now, the UNESCO Institute of Statistics has not provided data and indicators for rural areas.

There are several methodologies for defining “rural” in ways that capture the unique characteristics of rural areas compared to urban zones. Typically, definitions of rural areas use the following criteria:

- # population size and density;
- # access to public services;
- # relationships with urban areas;
- # main economic activity.

A further dimension is added by the fact that, increasingly, there are multiple types of “rural”. The traditional notion that “rural” refers only to farm communities, often with high levels of poverty is not always valid. While rural communities are often classified as low income, some are wealthy, including in poor countries. Stereotypical images of rural life prevent understanding the wide diversity that exists not only across countries but also within countries.

Treating rural areas as a unique entity with similar needs and features is clearly not an effective approach. Yet, in spite of such complexity, one should recognize that rural people, at least, know when they are rural (Atkin & Merchant 2004).

An Emerging Focus for Evaluating Educational Interventions in Rural Areas: Towards Sustainable Livelihoods

Livelihood approaches have assumed increasing prominence in both academic and policy literature on rural development since the 1990s (Maddox 2005). These approaches, which continue to develop, argue that livelihoods and wellbeing must be understood in relation to the range of assets and entitlements that people can draw on in managing their lives (Chambers & Conway 1991).

Livelihood approaches avoid thinking of the economy as a discrete or compartmentalized sphere, and instead emphasize the broader range of assets that impact the well-being and the viability of people's livelihoods. These assets encompass the resources, skills and entitlements that people can draw on in managing their lives and coping with change. The ways that policies and institutional structures impact upon livelihood opportunities are also taken into account.

Livelihood approaches can inform educational policy, but also highlight the centrality of education and learning for rural livelihoods, whether that is in formal schooling, non-formal education, agricultural education, or through informal learning opportunities. Livelihood approaches also draw attention to the transformative potential of education as a central component in human development, in helping people to manage their resources, access and deal with institutions, and cope with vulnerability (Sen 2003). Livelihood approaches build on Sen's work, and on participatory approaches toward development (Ellis & Seeley 2005).

Education, including vocational education and training, should therefore be considered as an essential component in livelihood-oriented programs. Beyond what people are able to achieve through education and learning, livelihood approaches consider how educational interventions may contribute to effective 'functionings', rather than assuming that educational 'access' will necessarily lead to improved livelihoods. This suggests a greater consideration of the range of learning styles and opportunities, and the importance of lifelong learning, rather than a narrow orientation to schooling. It may be, for example, that vocational training for adults and youth can enable the rural poor to better access resources. Livelihood approaches aim to build on people's assets and strengths, rather than focus on what people do not have.

Education and learning clearly have a significant role to play in livelihoods, since they represent both an important 'asset' (knowledge, skills and capabilities), and learning can help people to improve their lives, manage vulnerability and change. These insights do not provide ready-made answers for policy makers who might want to apply such perspectives in education. Indeed, questions such as that of educational relevance appear to be a complex one; people-centered development must consider a wide diversity of livelihoods, of aspirations and the diversity of cultural, linguistic and environmental contexts.

Rather than suggesting simple solutions, the livelihoods literature highlights a number of policy relevant problems and issues that can be considered. These include the challenge of how education provision in rural settings can respond to the diversity of livelihoods,

contexts and aspirations, and how education and learning can effectively build upon people's livelihoods and assets.

The role of education is not to 'train' people in a narrow sense for the existing rural occupations. Education is about more than earning a living, and has multiple aims and benefits. These include the opportunity to assist people in their social and economic mobility, and contributions to cultural and political identity and participation (Sen 1993). The research literature on livelihoods provides some important insights into these processes in drawing our attention to broader processes of change in rural areas, highlighting for example the significance of economic diversification, the importance of non-farm and urban-based income and resources in 'rural' livelihoods, and the significance of migration between rural and urban areas (Ellis 1998).

The Transformation of Rural Labor Markets and the Increasing Role of the Non-Farm Rural Economy

The transformation of rural labor markets has much to do with changing domestic and external macroeconomic conditions. In the context of globalization, the degree of vulnerability of agriculture, and therefore of rural labor markets to international economic change, is greater. However, macroeconomic developments influence farm households not only by affecting the prices of agricultural commodities, but by affecting employment opportunities in the non-farm sector. As a general trend, there is a greater prevalence of non-farm employment and plural activities among farm households and a corresponding greater dependence on non-farm income (Bryceson 1996; Bryceson & Jamal 1997). Traditionally, agriculture has been considered as the main sector for employment creation in rural areas. Hence, for many people, 'rural' and 'agriculture' are synonymous. Increasingly, policy makers realize that the job creation potential of the farm sector is limited and that new sources of rural employment will be required in the future.

Available data shows that non-farm employment and income are significant in rural areas. Non-farm sources of income are estimated to average around 50 percent of household incomes in sub-Saharan Africa (Reardon 1997; Ellis 2004). This share already represents around 30 to 40 percent in South Asia. This trend suggests some re-thinking about the relevance and role of education and training in promoting and enhancing rural livelihoods. The degree to which people are able to diversify and adapt to change is dependent on them having the knowledge and skills to do that.

Although the rise of the non-farm rural economy seems to be a global trend, the nature of the activities involved vary greatly from country to country, depending on the level of development. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where rural poverty is widely spread, non-farm activities remain closely linked to agriculture and poorly related to the urban economy. Depending on the specificities of each zone, there is a tendency, notably in the poorest areas, to derive non-farm income from migration to cities or abroad. In Latin America, where the rural population represents a lower share of the total population, light manufacturing

is growing in rural areas within the framework of increasing urban/rural economic linkages. This pattern is even more prominent in East and South East Asia where the rural non-farm economy combines various types of agriculture-related activities with more advanced forms of manufacturing.

Gender can also be an important determinant to analyze the rise of non-farm rural employment. Available data for Latin America indicate that, except for Bolivia, non-farm employment has become dominant for active rural women. In a recent study, off-farm work represented between 65 percent and 93 percent of women's employment in nine countries out of eleven (Berdegué et al. 2000). On the contrary, agriculture remained the major source of employment for rural men, with the sole exception of Costa Rica.

In a process of rural transformation, higher levels of education among the farm population and the availability of off-farm jobs facilitate the adjustment. In this context, a major concern is that non-farm activities can be difficult to access for the rural poor, partly due to their low level of education and training. Hence, education should be an entire part of support interventions aiming at developing economic activities which include agriculture, but which should also expand beyond it to address the vast variety of skills and complexity of learning needs of the rural people (FAO & IIEP 2005).

Combining Human Capital and Social Capital in Evaluation

It is usually recognized that the low level of human capital in rural areas affects the growth of rural economies. Increasingly, dynamic rural communities see investing in education as an important tool for their economic development. Rural people, as well as governments and the international community, are also sensitive to the "brain drain" outside the rural areas as people, including the best educated, move to cities in search for better job opportunities and for what they perceive as a "modern" lifestyle.

The link between a higher level of human capital and rural development is generally attributed to several factors. The direct effects of human capital on labour productivity are well known and documented. Additional human capital is also supposed to facilitate adaptation to change, particularly technological change. Furthermore, a more educated labour force is seen as an attraction to capital. In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the spill-over effects that an increase of the level of human capital in a community can produce on local development. For example, networking and information exchange are often seen as critical components which benefit from education investments.

Hence, the economic literature attributes clear linkages between educational attainment and the capacity for growth in output, income and employment. Yet, assessing the impact of investments in education on the development of particular rural areas remains challenging, and the specific practices required and the enabling conditions remain to be fully identified and analyzed. Translating human capital formation into poverty reduction and economic growth depends of the particular structure of the rural economy. Furthermore, educational interventions may, at least in the short term, produce a negative effect on farm employment

as a result of the introduction of modern technologies. It is generally felt that the inability of evaluation tools to fully grasp the impact of human capital formation on rural development has contributed to the relative disregard of donors for agricultural education, adult education, and other types of non-formal education in rural areas.

Typically, evaluation approaches focus on educational and economic benefits, but overlook the effects of education on social capital (Baron et al. 2000). Hence, schools and training centres are often the focal point of rural communities and the centre of much community activity. Therefore, educational institutions have a strong influence on the vitality of rural communities (Atkin 2003). Schools can strongly contribute to strengthen the identity of rural communities and the sense of inclusiveness (Kilpatrick & Falk 2003; Kilpatrick, Field & Falk 2003).

In this context, it is worth noting that, while evaluation studies have paid considerable attention to the linkages between education and poverty levels of farmers and rural households, a much smaller body of work has focused on the importance of educational institutions to rural community viability (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2005).

Localized Public Policies: The Necessity for an Integrated Approach

Although often overlooked, place constitutes an important dimension for public policies. As outlined above, development interventions, including in education, have different impacts across space. Rural areas are not monolithic, yet rural and urban areas face different issues and therefore have different policy needs. If these differences are not taken into account, development policies can have little impact on poverty reduction and educational development. Both the diversity found in rural areas and the specificities resulting from rurality due to isolation and economic trends are important to take into account when assessing the impacts of public policies on rural development. Moreover, it is important to take into account that external support can produce unanticipated or unintended effects on rural areas because of their distinctive characteristics.

The experience of OECD countries, particularly within the European Union, suggests that territorial policies can contribute to promote investments and eventually development in the most remote areas. This approach may be particularly needed for the prioritization of public investment within the framework of PRSPs. External partners must offer more concerted and effective assistance to develop basic education geared to agriculture, rural development and food security, especially in the poorest countries.

Globalization brings both threats and opportunities to rural regions. However this context often fragilizes traditional agricultural activities. The new policy agenda promotes a shift away from past reliance on agriculture towards an integrated multi-sectoral approach for rural development. Implementing such a vision requires the adoption of a holistic perspective, linking scattered policy initiatives into a comprehensive framework. This emerging agenda is sometimes named as “new rural governance”; it is based on consultation, negotiation, and partnerships among government, local authorities and rural communities.

Great emphasis is placed on cross-sector coordination and the formulation of local strategies. Agriculture and education are key components within these strategies, but they are treated in relation to other issues.

Hence, it is necessary to locate support to education in poverty-stricken rural areas within the wider context of rural development and to promote multi-sectoral approaches designed and implemented with a high level of community involvement. In the medium and long term, education-only responses are likely to fail. Enabling public investment and growth processes in rural areas are therefore required for sustained educational development. In the context of increasing decentralization, building local institutional capacities is much needed, considering the weak implementation record of governments in low-income countries. Furthermore, new forms of aid such as PRSPs and budgetary support do require adequate institutional capacities, including at the local level. There is therefore a strong case for donors to give more attention to local level institutions.

One interesting initiative promotes the clustering of rural communities in order to create a critical mass for development. Such strategies are also meant to contribute to the shaping of a positive self-image in many rural communities, essential to poverty reduction, education and economic development. Moreover, it also promotes networking to encourage and facilitate rural areas in their ability to learn from each other's experience. As a result, co-ordination between levels of government is becoming more flexible. The top-down and hierarchical planning and managing structures are being replaced by mechanisms that are more responsive to rural conditions and local needs.

For example, in Mexico, micro-regions provide a framework for infrastructure investment in regional hubs (OECD 2005). This initiative constitutes a breakaway from traditional sector-based policies and offers an integrated bottom-up approach that acknowledges the importance of sharing decision-making responsibilities with all concerned public authorities and rural communities. It involves 14 federal ministries, and regional and local governments. Special emphasis is placed on working with rural civil society in order to build a strong social capital which serves as the main input in an endogenous process that supports sustainable rural development.

This new rural governance regime is perfectly consistent with the essence of decentralization, a policy and a goal which is at the top of the policy agenda in most countries. More than a simple transfer of authority, decentralization is a capacity-building process, which should result in stronger rural communities.

This framework provides an important "rural lens" through which development policies and external support can be reviewed to ensure the needs and priorities of rural people are considered. This would require moving away from traditional sectoral evaluation towards an assessment of the overall results achieved in target territories. Yet, governments and donors still give prevalence to sectoral objectives.

The Experience of the Education for Rural People (ERP) Flagship

The ERP flagship provides a good illustration of the efforts made by the international community to better respond to the particular needs and circumstances of rural people in education (FAO & IIEP 2002). FAO and UNESCO launched the global Education for Rural People (ERP) flagship partnership during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 in Johannesburg (UNESCO 2004b).

Ensuring that Education for All (EFA) initiatives reach rural people constitutes an urgent task for the international community at large if the world is to achieve sustainable development as well as the MDGs (Avila & Gasperini 2005). Pursuing ERP is crucial to achieve all the MDGs, and in particular MDG1, aiming at eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, MDG2 focusing on achieving universal primary education, and MDG3 on gender equality and empowering women. There is, however, still a relatively low level of awareness among decision makers on the importance of rurality for achieving EFA and poverty reduction goals. Weaknesses of education services in rural areas are partly due to the fact that countries lack knowledge, trained people, experience, resources and infrastructure to plan and deliver effective basic education services to rural people. Moreover, coordination mechanisms between Ministries of Education, Ministries of Agriculture and civil society remain to be improved in most developing countries.

ERP has helped catalyze collaboration among sectors that traditionally have worked in isolation from each other, such as agriculture, rural development and education (Acker & Gasperini 2003). The members of the ERP flagship include institutions from the education, agriculture and rural development sectors, including governments, international organizations, civil society, media, private sector and academic and research institutions. A website (<http://www.fao.org/sd/erp/>) was launched to serve as a tool for advocacy, networking, and knowledge-sharing on ERP (FAO 2003).

Beyond the establishment of a global community of interest around rural issues in education, the flagship initiative aims at developing capacity-building instruments and forums to assist the donor community and governments in better targeting and evaluating their educational interventions in rural areas (FAO & IIEP 2002). Monitoring basic education activities targeting rural people is a prerequisite for planning and implementing reforms or improvements. As already outlined, basic statistics on the school-age population, enrolments, attendance, completion and promotion are essential for the good management of the school system, but are often incomplete and flawed for rural areas. These and other quantitative and qualitative data, broken down by gender, community, type of schooling, administrative area and other appropriate categories, are useful in detecting disparities and malfunctions that require corrective action. Analysis of these data can reveal urban/rural disparities, but also identify the differences and diversity among rural areas that need to inform planning and management decisions at the sub-national level. The results of such analyses, can inform the allocation and use of resources for basic education in rural areas.

Monitoring non-formal education activities in rural areas is particularly problematic;

especially those activities operated by NGOs and local community associations. Where the government provides funding or other support, providers can be required to file periodic reports, including data items such as numbers of beneficiaries by age and gender, that are useful for planning and management purposes. Another option is conducting sample surveys to obtain illustrative data on the nature, scope, organization and outcomes of non-formal basic education activities in selected rural areas.

Standardized testing of learning achievement can provide important information on the performance of schools. Senior managers of the school system may use test results as one criterion in determining the allocation of human and material resources. With equity in educational opportunity now a key policy objective, disparities in test results that favour urban areas should incite compensatory investments in rural schooling. In situations where the reporting of statistics and test results for rural schools is not yet systematic or reliable, sample surveys may be an affordable option to obtain useful information both on school and classroom conditions and on learning achievement.

Beyond the availability of reliable data, evaluating the results of education support programs on rural people requires the development and use of appropriate indicators (Sauvageot & Dias Da Graca 2005). In particular, assessing issues of access, equity, quality efficiency and management in rural areas involves specific instruments. Then, the particular focus of rural-specific indicators depends on the goals set for education development in rural areas. It is also essential to review trends in both urban/rural disparities and in disparities within rural areas.

However, for the moment, the framework and mechanisms set by the international community to monitor EFA do not pay particular attention to rural issues (UNESCO 2005). The Dakar Framework focuses on other aspects of education, such as the elimination of gender disparities at the primary level, access to the secondary level, and access to non-formal education. Yet, assessing education progress in rural areas and trends in urban/rural disparities constitute important issues for evaluation (Atchoarena & Gasperini 2005). The development of new indicators to monitor and assess education in rural areas and urban/rural disparities would certainly contribute to improve our understanding of the dynamics of and challenges for EFA.

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