Basic Education in the 1990's: 
A Critical Appraisal in the Context of Latin America.

Copyright
Daniel A. Morales-Gómez (IDRC-Ottawa)
Carlos Alberto Torres (University of Alberta)

Paper prepared for the panel on "Educational Reform in Latin America" at the
Comparative International Education Society Meeting
in Anaheim, California, March 22-25, 1990.

Abstract
This paper examines the current social, political and economic context of Latin America in the light of the educational for all proposal (EFA). Education for All proposal (EFA) reviews the symptoms of crisis at the global level, the major achievements and promising trends and factors, the potential contribution of education to social and economic development and the resolution of global problems, and discusses the necessity to meet the basic learning needs of all, from ethical and socio-economic standpoints. After defining what basic learning needs is, they propose a new vision that emphasizes learning achievement, flexible and varied forms of education, mobilizing new resources, establishing new partnerships, and enhancing the environment for learning. This paper discusses critically the notion of a new vision, the role that the EFA proposal adds in the context of the world-capitalist system, the prevailing division of labor, and international donor agencies, the idea of a new worldwide consensus on diagnosis and solutions for a global crisis, and the political, social, and scientific-technological implications of this proposal for Latin America. These critical assessments of the foundations and rationale for the proposal of EFA is done from a pragmatic perspective of historical-structural theory and drawing from the experience of Latin America's "realpolitik". In concluding, some suggestions to implement the "Declaration of Education for All" in the region are made.
The Context.

Latin America enters the nineties in the midst of a pervasive economic and fiscal crisis, with emerging, new fragile democracies in the Southern Cone, a political and military stalemate in Central America, drastic social and political reaccommodations in Brazil, Venezuela and Mexico, a growing drug war in Colombia (that is affecting the political and social stability of the country), the end of formal military ruling in Chile, and important political transitions in Nicaragua and Peru. Overall, Latin American countries are undergoing a drastic process of economic re-structuring to face the pressures of the external debt. A process of fiscal and economic re-structuring that may result in growing popular protest and upheavals (Eckstein, 1988).

Latin American capitalism in the eighties showed regressive trends. While in the seventies there had been a GNP per capita growth of 40.9% in the first six years of the eighties GNP per capita growth is 6.5% negative. This process shows differential intensity in diverse countries: Argentina that grew 8.7% in the 1970's achieved a negative rate of 14.2% between 1980-86; Brazil that has had a tremendous growth in the seventies reaching 80% of GNP per capita, grew only 1.6% between 1980-86; Mexico decreased from 41% of economic growth in the seventies to -11.9% between 1980-86, and Venezuela that grew 41% in the seventies loses its dynamism in the early eighties with -19% of GNP growth (figures from the Inter-American Bank of Development, cited by Boron: 1988: 44).

What marks the beginnings of the nineties is the staggering Latin American external debt, and the pains of Latin American states in meeting the obligations of the debt using a substantial amount of exports; it is known that Argentina with its 10 billion dollars of annual exports revenues has dedicated, on average since 1983, 6 billion dollars per year to pay for the interests of the debt. Capital flight and de-industrialization are two of the most radical processes undergoing in the region since the late seventies. For instance, the participation of manufactured products in the total GNP has declined from 24.9% in the seventies to 23.6% in 1980-86. Overall, the GDP between 1980-86 fell by approximately 14% equal to the levels in 1976 (CEPAL, 1989). On average, per capital income in the region is 9% lower today than in 1980. This combined pressure of de-investment an
(3)

De-industrialization has increased the amount of open unemployment and under-employment. Urban open unemployment according to ILO projections [1986] grew almost 40% between 1980-84, bringing the estimated level of real unemployment close to 67%.

The social consequences of these combined processes of underdevelopment result in critical social problems such as growing poverty. For instance, Argentina which is known as a food-producer society had by 1970 only 5% of its total population living below the poverty line; by the end of the 1980's, this proportion reached 22% of the population. Food rioting and protest against price increases have been notorious in Venezuela, Santo Domingo, Brazil and Argentina in the last two years.

This situation seems to become worse when regional payment of the debt is estimated to amount 20 billion dollars per year since 1982. For some, Latin American countries are meeting the capital needs of the recession in industrialized societies by sending to the banks in those societies the equivalent of two Marshall Plans used for the reconstruction of Europe (Boron, 1988: 45; O'Donnell, 1985).

In the same vein, UNICEF has argued that: "Taking everything into account -loan, aid, repayments of interest and capital- the southern world is now transferring at least $20 billion a year to the northern hemisphere. And if we were also to take into account the effective transfer of resources implied in the reduced materials, then the annual flow from the poor to the rich might be as much as $60 billion each year (UNICEF, 1989: 15).

Latin American and the Caribbean development process has been derailed considering that per capita GNP has fallen, labor productivity has declined considerably during the 1980’s and debt repayments have risen to substantial proportions of export earnings (UNICEF, 1989: 2). A similar diagnosis is made by the 1989 Annual Report of the World Bank: "Latin America continues to suffer slow growth, as per capita GDP declined for the second consecutive year. Major areas of concern in 1988 included trade, capital flow, debt, and the environment" (1989: 20).

This social and economic calamities are happening just when Latin America is emerging from a dark period in its history, a period in which human rights were severely abused by authoritarian governments that imposed a "sociology of fear" to the society, dismantling not only
the political opposition or the established industrial base of the societies such as in Argentina, but many of the key cultural and educational institutions of the countries. Societies that were noted for their early improvements in literacy and primary schooling like Argentina or Chile at the beginning of the century, are facing the decade of the 1990 with a resurgence of absolute and functional illiteracy rates, and declining quality standards in elementary education. Adult education and the lack of basic education continue to be main problems in societies such as Brazil, Venezuela and Mexico. Not only education but health gains are being lost. George reports that research has been able to assess the debt-mortality effect of the debt: "Each additional $10 a year in interest payment [per capita] reflected 0.39 of a year less in life expectancy improvement over the decade [1970-1980]" (Sell and Kunitz, 1987: 14-17). Their formula works out to an average 367 days of life foregone by every inhabitant (1988: 143).

Once again the importance and impact of the external debt in the state's capacities for formulating and implementing social policies should not be underestimated: between 1976 and 1987 the region's debt grew from $160.7 to 440.6 billion (Latin American Newsletters, 1989). Research has still to fully address the causes of the progressive deterioration in the quality, quantity and relevance of education in Latin America in the seventies. Some people argue that this situation is the direct outcome of the staggering debt that built up in the Third World in the 1960's and 1970's.

In a recent paper examining the unintended effect of the Latin American debt crisis, Fernando Reimers (1989) argues that as debt levels increase, levels of educational expenditure decrease. There seems to be no apparent impact in the balance of recurrent-capital expenditures, but the impact is higher in the 'softer' portions of the recurrent budget since the share of teachers salaries increases as levels of educational expenditure decrease. Longitudinal evidence tend to suggest that as debt increases education diminishes as a priority of government expending in most of the countries. For some governments the same is true of total education expenditures, producing the threshold-effect in some countries: before the external debt reaches certain levels the association between debt and education is positive; beyond those levels the association flattens out or becomes negative.
In this context educational expansion, improvements in educational quality, particularly in basic education, and quality of educational opportunities are, to put it mildly, at risk. In the context of this social, economic and educational calamities, a new project for a world-wide educational reform in basic education is being proposed under the aegis of the "Education for All" conference held in Thailand, March 5-9, 1990. What follows is a short summary and criticism of the overall proposal, and in the concluding comments, we will suggest some criteria to analyze the possible implementation of the proposal in the region.

**Education for All: Premises and Proposal.**

The "education for all" proposal (EFA) reviews the symptoms of crisis at the global level, the major achievements and promising trends and factors, the potential contribution of education to social and economic development and the resolution of global problems, and discusses the necessity to meeting the basic learning needs of all, from ethical and socio-economic standpoints. After defining what learning needs of all is, the documents propose a new vision that emphasizes learning achievement, flexible and varied forms of education, mobilizing new resources, establishing new partnerships, and enhancing the environment for learning.

At the outset we should say that the documents (particularly the background document) reflect some standard assumptions of neoclassical economics as expressed in Human Capital theory. These neoclassical assumptions are blended with ethical and moral considerations that ameliorate, but do not modify in essence, the fundamental economist rationale for policy formation deriving from Human Capital perspectives.

The information presented is rich and varied, and reflects a state-of-the-art educational research, based on comparative, cross-national, macro-statistical information—although some of the statistics are not up to date. Input-output analysis and policy research analysis, the type of research usually supported by many of the major donors in education is presented as the key tools for planning. Research findings are organized to support policy conclusions of the documents, and
to that extent, the more qualitative observations or innovative experiences are neglected in the policy concerns and recommendations of the documents.¹

There is a strong instrumental rationale for policy-planning in the document, assuming that in spite of the regional and country disparities, the overall purpose of planning is similar across the board, thus the priorities should be set at a global level.

In short, what the documents reflect is more than an attempt to coordinate external aid to education and enhance greater cooperation among external and domestic partners which would be mutually beneficial (WCEFA/Background document: 83; 5.53). The documents attempt to create a new, world-wide consensus about the priorities of development (social and economic), the educational priorities for the next decade, the strategies and priorities of educational financing, and the political strategies of support and contextualization of the overall EFA project, priorities and financing in the diverse countries.

This world-wide consensus is built on the notion of a new vision. This new vision is built on the premises that 1) quality of education has declined primarily because of failure in the efficiency of the system in the developing world, 2) there is a need for setting common achievement standards as a means to measure educational development across countries in the developing world, 3) since the development crisis in the Third World is, to a large extent, an outcome of inadequate decisions in the allocation of resources to education, international organizations and donor agencies, in partnership with governments and non-government organizations should set the agenda for the 1990, establishing new priorities, strategies and alliances, and 4) the expansion and diffusion of basic education for all, reallocating resources to this end, is seen as the best solution to poverty, unemployment, and the like.

In addition, three assumptions are basic in the documents. First, there is a growing inter-dependency in the world-system, which calls for increasing actions of solidarity and collaboration between nations to address the symptoms of crisis. Second, once more the role of basic education is strategic for the resolution of these problems. A corollary of these two assumptions, and a third

¹ For this paper, the authors have revised drafts A and B of the following documents: World Charter on Education for All; Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs; Meeting Basic Learning Needs: A New Vision for the 1990s (Background Document).
assumption in itself, is the notion of a zero-sum economy. With the exception of fresh funds deriving from cuts in military expending in industrialized societies, there will be no new funds available in the global system to promote development at all levels in the next decade.

These three assumptions may be challenged. First, while there is a growing interdependency in many respects, there is a growing technological and scientific dependency between the core and the periphery of the capitalist system. Can basic education for all address this technological imbalance?

Second, the strategic notion of basic education to solve many of the problems and bottlenecks of the development process, although presented cautiously throughout the document, may be challenged. It is still argued that "education is the key to a safer, healthier, more prosperous world and that basic learning is essential to economic, cultural and economic development" (Charter, preamble). Perhaps, this is a reductionist and overly optimistic perspective on the role of education and development. One of the most difficult notions we find in the document is the idea of a balance in the appropriation of resources between different levels of the educational system in light of the growing technological dependency of developing societies.

The third assumption of a zero-sum economy may not be entirely acceptable, particularly when the nations of Eastern Europe will become deeply incorporated into the economic exchanges of the world system in the next decade, attracting capital and buying more industrial commodities; China, after the turmoil, has regained its accelerated pace of modernization, and still many countries in Africa and Latin America will offer tremendous opportunities for investments with available, in many cases qualified, and relatively cheap labor force. Investment in Latin America and Africa may help developing new internal markets for consumption. Likewise, by not considering the implications of the external debt in all its magnitude and interconnections with social policies and education, a key element in the process of growth and political stability of democratic but dependent-development societies is left aside. In short, the grim assumption of an stagnating, zero-sum world-economy may not resist closer scrutiny in the context of the current changes, or the possibility of manipulating certain economic variables in the world system.
Whether plausible or not, these three assumptions seem to underlie a basic purpose of the documents: to reinforce a new division of labor based on the technical qualification of the labor force and differential productivity of industrialized and developing societies. Education for all may be an attempt to mobilize international and national, financial, human, and material resources to promote the universalization of a set of skills, knowledge, values and attitudes in the labor force. This will allow capital (from industrialized societies, but also from domestic sectors in the developing world) greater flexibility and mobility in the world-system, becoming less subject to state's controls and national constraints (i.e., inadequate surplus of basically qualified labor). The issue of technological dependency should be addressed in discussing the possibility of a new division of labor.

In the EPA documents, there is no indication of how this technological dependency and imbalances between countries can be overcome. In fact, the underlying assumption seem to be that people (poor people, marginalized populations, etc) will enhance their skills to survive in a more competitive market economy, but the position of the nations in the continuing of technological development will not be altered. Quite the contrary, if dependent-development societies will allocate their scarce funds (or whatever funds they can bring from outside donors) reapportioning resources to achieve an appropriate balance among primary, secondary and other educational levels, the possibilities of using these resources for promoting technological advancement will be hampered. Scientific and technological development usually takes place in higher education and in institutes of research and development in corporations.

A common dilemma of democratic governments in dependent societies is how to subsidize basic education offered to the population at large, as a basic human right, and how, at the same time, to find the amount of resources to continue promoting scientific and technological research (which usually imply subsidizing an intellectual, scientific and technological elite that will promote innovation and technological change). The answer of the EPA document to this dilemma is to ignore it. The search for a balance, promoting more basic education without considering the technological implications, eventually may end up reinforcing the pattern of technological dependency; a
dependency which may be considered as a fundamental cause of the present social and economic disparities between nations and social groups within nations.

We would not be surprised if some democratic governments in dependent-development societies will see this initiative with some reservations. The reports from the discussions during the meeting, and particularly the position of some Latin American and African governments, tend to confirm this idea. By not addressing this issue of technological dependency between countries, and particularly the role of multinationals corporations in this regard, the EFA documents practically suggest that to develop a common ground (i.e. basic education) in all societies is the only way to continue the process of development, even if this will entail hindering the development of higher education resources and techniques. The conclusion of that process is inevitable: the core, industrialized and highly technological societies will retain the lead in technological progress, and the peripheral, less developed and technologically dependent societies may, at best, become reservoirs of better qualified manpower. The role of basic education in developing societies seems to be clear: to upgrade the qualifications and skills, and to improve the attitudes and values of the population that will work mostly in manual occupations.

What is to be done? “Realpolitik”, Historical-Structural Pragmatism, and Strategies for Implementation in Latin America.

The proposed Charter of Education for All was modified during the Thailand meeting to become the Declaration of Education for All. In this sense, it has become a declaration similar to the Declaration of Human Rights proposed by UNESCO years ago, or the Persepolis Declaration of Literacy. The Declaration of Education for All is, in all respects, a moral rather than a policy planning commitment.

The sense of many researchers and some of the participants in the meetings was that the World Bank has been the leading player in organizing the Thailand Conference. It seems like the

---

2 Conversations with Emilio Mignone, from the Center for Legal and Social Studies, Buenos Aires, and with M. K. Bocclus, from the Department of Educational Foundations, University of Alberta, were very helpful in clarifying the pragmatic implications of the basic education for all proposal.
Declaration of Education for All, and the preceding background documents, placing such a strong emphasis on the multidimensional power of basic education, are part and parcel of a new political economy for lending and international aid in educational development. A political economy framework to orient the lending policies in the nineties that, with its focus on basic education, is now slightly departing from the World Bank’s previous rationale: “There is no single lending priority in the Bank’s education sector. Any area of human capital . . . is a candidate for financing” (Haber and Heyneman, 1983: 472).

This slightly different policy framework is advanced in the context of a regressive policy in lending in the last years: Between 1978-83 commercial banks received $125 billion in interest payments, during which time they lend $140 billion. The Inter-American Dialogue argued in 1988 that “in the past two years, the World Bank boosted its lending to Latin America, but it also collected more principal and interest, so the net amount of resources transferred grew only modestly. The IMF and IDB provided even less capital than previously. In 1986 and 1987, the IMF collected more in debt service than it made available in new loans” (1988: 26-27). These figures serve as an indicator of the actual decline in international assistance. In spite of the rhetoric of many international organizations, the volume of aid has shrunk as a proportion of the internal capacity of industrialized nations. 3

This new rationale for lending in the “educational for all” project, strongly supported by the World Bank, may show that development banks may have enough cash liquidity to invest in education in the next decade. This excess of cash of development banks may be related to the flow of capitals sent by countries of the South as part of interest payments. In any case, if the money is there, and is going to be lend to developing countries, it make no sense to discuss whether that lending scheme should take place or not: poor, dependent countries are eager to receive fresh loans to fuel their investments in many areas of policy, including education; and if the lending agencies have the resources, it is logically their mandate to execute it.

3 For instance, the Canadian and International Development Agency and the International Development Research Centre in Canada have diminished their grants-in-aid capacity approximately in 40% of their previous record; and this situation could continue for the next three years.
(11)

What could be more important is to discuss what are the best conditions for Latin American societies to enter into lenders-debtors agreements for the next decade, and whether the new set of priorities of investing in basic education advocated by the Declaration of Education for All should be accepted as is.

The pressure of many African and Latin American countries in the Thailand meeting, make it possible that the issue of the external debt, and the need to link investment policies in education to the development of science and technology in the developing world, have received, if not a prominent position in the Declaration, at least a modest place. This situation, compared with the rationale underlying previous drafts of the EFA documents, constitutes a big leap forward.

Shall Latin American countries promote basic education for all, in the terms proposed by the Declaration? At the outset we should discuss the policy-planning and analytical rationale of the proposal. It is widely accepted that basic education and literacy are prerequisites for social, cultural and economic development. It is also accepted that the failure of societies to recognize the developmental value of education, to provide learning opportunities, and to adequately invest in human resources severely limits their national prospects for further development. However, to focus the attention only or mostly on the degrees of recognition developing countries give to education, and on the efficiency of their strategies to invest in education, is a convenient and less controversial way to explain why some societies score better on a developmental scale than other. In addition, this approach does not enhance the understanding about how a variety of structural, non-educational factors, interact to produce educational failure or success.

To argue about the convenience to promote "basic education for all" as a contribution—though not the main key— to promote development, should not impede a clear understanding of the structural factors which are responsible for this lack of development—beyond and above constraints in human resource training, poor technical or planning judgement, or poor allocation of resources. In short, dependency relations still remaining in what is otherwise a much more interdependent world today as it was two decades ago, and the implications of structural and political dependency in terms of differential power and domination among countries and between social groups, should continue to be highlighted as key sources of the development debacle of the last decade in Latin
America. It is in the context of a historical and structural policy framework that the "education for all" proposal should be negotiated, and re-negotiated from a pragmatic perspective.

Latin American countries will be better off in linking their applications for basic education loans to developmental banks to a set of conditions. The first condition is that in placing emphasis in promoting an education for all, there should not be a shift in countries' priorities to continue, at the same time, and with the same intensity, promoting the development of science and technology, and employment policies in the labor markets. Hence, there must be a strategy to link investment in basic education with investments in the higher education, science and technology sub-sectors. Indeed, the investment in basic education could be done by expanding extra-curricular programs of the universities, and by linking research and development of universities, as well as university spending power, with basic education concerns of nearby communities.

The second condition, is to devise projects of adult and youth basic education linked to employment creation, job placement, and re-industrialization of the Latin American economies. This obviously has to be done in the context of a process of attracting new capitals to fuel productive investment in the countries, and above all, the control of inflationary tendencies in most of the Latin American economies, with its paradoxical corollary of high interest rates and recession. In short, a policy to expand basic education for all should be linked to a policy to expand employment in the formal and informal labor markets, particularly for young school leavers and working-class and peasant unemployed adults.

The third condition, and the only one that may allow the most heavily indebted Latin American governments to have any leverage in discussing with lending agencies, is to somehow tie the new loans for basic education with a continuous re-negotiation of the external debt, particularly following imaginative strategies such as the "swaps" arrangements devised by Mexico. Eventually a formula may be found to link new loans for basic education with a substantial decrease in the principal and rates of interest of the external debt in the countries. This will imply, indeed, aggressive educational reforms in the Latin American countries, but also important financial re-adjustments in the relationships between the Banks and the debtor countries.
If these three conditions are met, the impact of these new policies for basic education in Latin America could be positive. A number of questions still remain though. While this "new vision" of education for the 1990s seems to be shifting towards setting common achievement standards as a means to measure educational development across countries in the developing world, Latin American governments should raise a series of questions about the rationale within which such standards are to be defined, the means for their enforcement, and the approach to their measurement. Several areas of potential conflict can be identified. They relate to the questions of what constitutes acceptable levels of achievement in education from a developmental point of view; how criteria can be established and measured in international comparative terms; and what role the measurement of achievement and its outcome will play in decisions concerning the allocation of resources for education. An underlying concern is the role of the international actors involved in determining targets, levels of acceptability, and appropriateness of measurement tools.

In the same vein, the domestic control of the overall educational investments in Latin American countries, and whether international aid should be subject to multilateral negotiations or a negotiations with a single institutions pooling resources, as it seems to be suggested by the background documents of BFA, are important concerns. These concerns should remain at the top of the agendas in the negotiations that undoubtedly will result from attempts to fulfill what is predicated in the Declaration of Education for All.

Finally, the proposal of basic education for all in Latin America should be addressed taking into account the most recent historical experiences. One of the most original contributions to promote basic education has been related to experiments in popular education in the region. Considering basic education for adults, educational research has proven that the decisive feature of mainstream adult education are its methodological individualism, its technocratic and economic rationale for policy-making, its case-study or project-by-project approach, its normative and prescriptive emphasis instead of an explanatory and analytical focus, and its a-historical and anti-theoretical biases. A more dynamic approach, popular education, calls for democracy, participation and economic political reorganization of the poor and a greater autonomy for the communities. These premises are, indeed, a radical departure from mainstream adult education programs.
Undoubtedly, there are still numerous dilemmas for popular education, but its has moved from being an emergent educational model to become a politically established practice whose point of reference is popular movements (Torres, 1990).

In planning basic education for all in the nineties, the contribution of popular social movements, and the experiences with popular education should be given a prominent place, as it is currently the experience of the Movement for Literacy Training, MOVA-Sao Paulo, under the leadership of Paulo Freire. Basic education should be part and parcel of a process of democratic and participative planning, including the inputs of governments, non-government organizations, popular social movements, learners, and the financial contribution of lending institutions.