Particular Strategies for Particular Groups of Countries

Throughout this booklet, stress has been placed on the diversity of countries and of the circumstances that face them. This creates difficulties in generalization, but it is possible to identify commonalities within particular groups. The most obvious factor for grouping is economic strength or weakness. Other criteria for classifying states include political history (particularly to identify the states which have made a transition from socialism), and size of country.

Poor, Middle-Income, and Rich Economies

Although Hong Kong, China, Nauru, and Singapore are classified as ADB DMCs, their economic circumstances are vastly different from those of Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, and Mongolia. The economic differences between economies are reflected both in their current education systems and in approaches to the future. The prosperous economies already have high enrollment rates at all levels. Their governments and peoples remain rightly dissatisfied about qualitative aspects in their education systems, but the gap between them and the low-income groups is vast. The rich economies can meaningfully consider grasping new technologies for education on a wide scale, can aim to become global centers of expertise in certain aspects of research, and can afford to look after their handicapped and other disadvantaged citizens in a way that cannot be contemplated by poor societies.

At the other end of the scale are the countries in which enrollment rates, even for basic education, have never approached universality and are now stagnating or declining. Investment priorities in these countries are more likely to aim at raising enrollments than at improving quality, though of course the latter may be a route to the former. Despite the remarks made above about the need to be part of strategic innovations, for the poor countries investments in books may still be more important and cost effective than investments in computers; and while their governments may be attracted to philosophies of privatization both as a way to improve efficiency and to help in sharing the burden, the governments should still aim to contribute more to the education sector than they are currently doing.

In the middle is a group of countries that aspires to raise their profile and join the top rank. Throughout the region and beyond, analysts in middle-income countries have sought to identify the factors that have contributed to the so-called East Asian Miracle (World Bank 1993a), including those which are linked to the education sector, in order to emulate those which can be emulated. Whether simple formulas can be distilled from the experiences of the eight high-performing Asian economies (HPAEs) is a matter of dispute (Morris and Sweeting 1995; Lewin 1998; Mingat 1998; Mundle 1999). Nevertheless, the topic has naturally attracted considerable attention from many sides.

To some observers, however, the economic collapse in many parts of the region during the second half of 1997 meant that the image of a miracle had become somewhat tarnished (Desai 1998). The most-affected countries were Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, and Thailand. Although subsequent years brought some recovery, the crisis underlined the fragility not only of economic systems but also of country groupings for policy analysis. One result of the events was that a new grouping entered the arena, namely of seemingly vigorous economies that had suffered abrupt economic collapse (Godement 1999; Mallet 2000).

Even with such fluidity, however, the obvious fact remains that countries in different income groups must be viewed differently for the purposes of policy analysis in education as much as in other sectors. Variations between countries in different income groups have underpinned the bulk of earlier discussion in this booklet, as remarked, for example, in the commentary on rates of return by level of education in countries of different income groups. Differences between countries in different income groups have also dominated huge segments in the literature on education and development. As such, it is not necessary to dwell on the topic here; but clearly the matter must be borne in mind in all discussions of strategies and priorities.

Transitional and Long-Standing Capitalist Economies

The economies that have recently made a transition from centrally planned socialism face distinctive challenges that differ from those in long-standing capitalist economies. The formerly socialist DMCs are Cambodia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Mongolia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The countries that remain officially socialist but have moved to market economies form another group facing challenges that, in many respects, are similar. The countries in this group are PRC, Lao PDR, and Viet Nam.

Most countries of the former Soviet Union, together with Mongolia, had strong education systems prior to the political changes that overtook them in the early 1990s (Kitaev 1996; Gannicott 1998; UNICEF 1998). Their peoples thus look with considerable ambivalence at the serious deterioration that has taken place in at least some sectors. For example, Kazakhstan's public budget for education, which in 1990 represented 7 percent of GDP, fell to half that amount shortly after the 1991 political transition. A 1995 ADB review (p.13) noted that the education sector was still "being pushed by frequent ad-hoc expenditure reductions which, in the absence of a comprehensive and feasible sector adjustment policy and program, impact negatively on previously attained ... standards," and an official report written five years later (Kazakhstan 2000) did not show much improvement. In the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, the preschool sector has been hit particularly hard (Box 6).

The challenge to reorient both education systems and wider frameworks had still not been effectively achieved in most former Soviet systems by the late 1990s. The Soviet system had not encouraged institutions to monitor their expenses and conserve resources. Thus schools in some countries found themselves paying huge bills for utilities that previously they had taken for granted and that, even after they became conscious of them, they could not easily control e.g., because heating was supplied centrally and could not be turned off (ADB 1994, 1995, 1996c). Ministries and institutions also had to look with fresh eyes on such issues as teacher deployment and the numbers of nonteaching staff in schools.

Most of the transition economies faced tensions arising from the emergence of private institutions in higher education, which operated with little or no government supervision and control. In Mongolia, for example, private tertiary institutions mushroomed shortly after the official transition to capitalism in 1991 (Bray et al. 1994, 37). Many of these institutions focused on foreign languages, while others were specialized in such subjects as law, culture, and sports. By 1995 the institutions numbered 36 and catered to 24 percent of post-secondary students (Erdenesuren 1997, 83). However, they were very variable in quality; and the fact that the average size was just 70 students raised questions on whether they were operating with sufficient economies of

Box 6: The Negative Impact of Transition on Preschools in Central Asia

The Soviet period brought the development of a strong public preschool sector in the component parts of the Soviet Union, including in the states of Central Asia. For example, in 1990 nearly half the children in the target age group attended preschools in Kazakhstan. The figure for Uzbekistan was 40 percent, and that in Kyrgyz Republic was 33 percent (Klugman et al. 1997). The majority of these preschools were operated by enterprises, though some were operated by government ministries and local authorities.

The financial constraints of transition forced many enterprises either to divest themselves of preschools or to increase fees. Governments and local authorities faced similar pressures, with the result that many preschools were either privatized or closed. In Kazakhstan, the number of preschools fell from 8,881 in 1990 to 1,558 in 1998 (Kazakhstan 2000, 21); in Tajikistan from 958 in 1990 to 456 in 1998 (Tajikistan 2000, 21); and in the Kyrgyz Republic from 1,696 in 1990 to 449 in 1996 (Kyrgyz Republic 1997, 11, 29). Many people viewed this situation with considerable misgiving, for the preschools were considered to play an important economic as well as social function.

scale. Similar questions were applicable in Kazakhstan, where 65 private higher education institutions emerged between 1991 and 1995 (ADB 1995, 42). Thirty of these institutions were unlicensed, and 22 had fewer than 200 students.

Another contrast between the formerly socialist states and the long-standing capitalist states was in dropout rates at the school level. As noted above, in most Asian countries dropout rates have declined during the last two decades. However, in the formerly socialist states they rose abruptly during the early 1990s, the result of a combination of push and pull factors. Some students were pushed out of school by their inability to pay charges which the schools now levied; and some voluntarily left school in order to take advantage of the new opportunities in the urban labor force as petty hawkers, etc.

Countries of Different Sizes

The Asian and Pacific region contains the world's two largest countries in terms of population size (PRC and India) and the two smallest (Nauru and Tuvalu). While it seems self-evident that strategies for the largest and the smallest must differ, the implications of size, which of course also concern all the intermediate countries, are commonly overlooked.

The growing literature on education in small states (e.g., Bray 1992a; Bacchus and Brock 1993; Bray and Packer 1993; Crossley and Holmes 1999) stresses that such states are not simply scaled-down versions of larger states. Instead they have ecologies of their own, and need particular strategies both in education and other spheres. Among the most obvious is in higher education. Some states are too small to be able to operate national universities. These states either have no universities at all, or join regional institutions. The small states that do have national universities can only have institutions catering to a very limited range of specialties. The governments of small states are generally well advised to compare carefully the costs and benefits of operating their own institutions with the alternative of sending students to foreign universities. They may well find that the latter is less expensive and preferable in terms of quality. Small states may also need to consider similar trade-offs in the design and administration of examinations, teacher training, and curriculum development.

In contrast, large countries face major problems of coordination arising from the huge numbers of people and institutions involved. This is among the domains where analysts of the PRC and India feel that they can learn strategies from each other (Ahmed et al. 1991; Drèze and Sen 1995). More positively, large countries can generate such significant economies of scale that they can operate highly specialized institutions, which could not be contemplated even in medium-sized states. Thus the PRC, for example, has specialist universities for agriculture, transport, teacher education, and even aeronautics.

The nature of external aid projects may also need to differ in small and larger states. Small states are more likely to need either small or multifaceted projects, and they will require implementation strategies that take into account the scarcity of counterpart personnel, the personalized nature of bureaucracies, and the fact that small amounts of money have a much greater profile (Coyne and Bray 1999). Large countries, in contrast, usually have access to many more specialized personnel. They can also absorb substantial projects; and they are likely to have greater scope for shifting resources around should it be necessary to develop particular components of projects at short notice.