

# AFRICA'S GREAT LEAP BACKWARD

James Stanfield

This column comes to you directly from a five-star hotel in Maputo, Mozambique, where I am attending the 2008 conference of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA). Advertised as 'the most significant educational event for the African region', the biannual conference unites some 600 participants, including Ministers of Education, national and international development agencies, education experts from universities, as well as representatives from an endless number of NGOs and charities. A number of research papers are commissioned prior to the conference, and based upon their findings, the great and the good in African education are expected to develop a master plan detailing how to solve all existing problems. The 2008 conference is titled 'Beyond Primary Education – Challenges and Approaches to Expanding Learning Opportunities', and it would appear that after spending the last two decades attempting to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE), development experts have only just realised that this has now created a dramatic shortage of secondary school places, a factor which they had previously failed to take into account.

This is not the first international conference which has attempted to solve all of Africa's educational problems. The first occurred in 1961 in Addis Ababa, where African countries first agreed to achieve UPE by 1980. The Addis Ababa Plan outlined the educational needs identified by each African government, which included new classrooms and school buildings, a 'staggering' increase in trained and qualified teachers and the massive expansion of higher and adult education programmes. In order to meet these new educational needs, the master plan recommended that planning boards should be set up within Ministries of Education, which were to be staffed by a new generation of highly qualified and experienced educational planners. It was also agreed that a dramatic increase in international aid would be required to help 'prime the pump', and it was assumed that this aid would only be required until the investment in education had started to pay off in terms of economic growth. Unfortunately, things haven't exactly gone to plan and almost half a century (and hundreds

of conferences) later, exactly the same problems are still being discussed and the misguided belief that the solution lies in more government planning, combined with more international aid, remains fully intact.

What is surprising is that there is still a general reluctance to recognise why countries such as Singapore have experienced higher rates of growth than countries across sub-Saharan Africa, despite the fact that many African countries have invested more in education. When attempting to address these issues, many education experts simply divert the discussion back towards human capital theory and reinforce the importance of continually increasing investment in education, Chairman Mao style. This therefore becomes their key economic policy and the fact that GDP growth rates increase as a country's economic freedom improves is a subject with which they refuse to engage.

Although education may be important for economic growth, this does not mean that nationalising and centrally planning the whole sector is the best way forward, as this will restrict total investment in education (public and private) and will often result in education being provided which is of a low quality and of the wrong type. Increasing government investment in this type of education is likely to restrict growth by diverting scarce resources away from more productive uses.

After spending a week of watching and listening to development experts attempting to find solutions to the problems which they themselves have previously created, I am now in full agreement with Ben N. Azikiwe, from Lincoln University (USA), who in 1934 suggested that all attempts to transform the education of the African into a 'problem' were misdirected and that, despite the noble work being done by European governments: 'The African is not, and never has been, a problem; there is no such thing as an African educational problem; those who believe in such an oddity are problems in themselves!'

### Reference

Azikiwe, B. N. (1934) 'How Shall We Educate the African?', *African Affairs*, April, p. 144.

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