

Translated article: Margarita Langthaler (2013). Welche (Berufs)Bildung braucht wirtschaftliche Entwicklung? Reflexionen zum Beitrag beruflicher Bildung zur Privatsektorentwicklung. In: ÖFSE (Hg.) Österreichische Entwicklungspolitik, Analysen • Berichte • Informationen mit dem Schwerpunktthema "Private Sector Development – Ein neuer Businessplan für Entwicklung?", Wien, 73-78.

WHAT KIND OF (VOCATIONAL) EDUCATION IS REQUIRED FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?

REFLECTIONS ON VOCATIONAL TRAINING'S CONTRIBUTION TO PRIVATE SECTOR DEVELOPMENT¹

Margarita Langthaler

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) has been relegated to an inferior position in both international development cooperation and the academic discussion. It is now attracting greater attention again. This is due among other factors to an emphasis on economic promotion and private sector development. This paper initially considers historical aspects of TVET in the context of development and development cooperation. This is followed by an outline of the most important aspects of the current academic and political debate. Based on this, the paper discusses significant issues related to vocational training and private sector development.

Several recent publications have stressed the increased attention being paid to vocational training such as the 2012 progress report of Unesco's initiative *Education for All Youth and Skills. Putting Education to Work* (Unesco 2012). The World Bank's *World Development Report 2013: Jobs* also devotes a separate chapter to the issue of training (or skills) (World Bank 2012). Essentially, three reasons may be cited for this recent shift towards TVET. First, the huge increase in unemployment as a result of the global financial crisis in 2008, especially among youths and young adults has shifted the focus of attention to vocational training as a remedy. Second, experience in the education sector of international development cooperation has shown that the strong focus on primary education was too narrowly conceived. As a consequence of this, many developing countries are facing bottlenecks in secondary education and an overall lack of educational quality due to the neglect of other educational sectors. The demand for (employment-relevant) post-primary training has also seen an increased interest in TVET. Ultimately, development cooperation's focus on private sector development also raises the question of what kind of training is required to ensure the partner countries' economic competitiveness. Vocational training also becomes

relevant here in the context of lifelong learning: the ever more demanded lifelong ability and willingness to continue training has to be seen in accordance with the principle of aligning training processes to the rapidly changing needs of the economy.

TVET IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES – COLONIAL HERITAGE AND MODERN MARGINALISATION

The form, content, direction and social status of TVET in many developing countries, especially in Africa, are strongly influenced by the legacy of their particular colonial education system. In contrast to general education systems, which have a certain degree of homogeneity as a result of the international initiatives Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), vocational training structures in developing countries vary greatly. In particular, there is a striking difference between the former British and French empires (Oketch 2007). In the former French colonies formal TVET includes strong general education components, whereby doubt is often cast on its preparatory value, especially for the proportionally very important informal sector. In Britain's former colonies, as in the UK, a highly pragmatic approach to vocational training prevails, which focuses on the employability of the learners. Job-specific abilities and skills account for a great deal of the curriculum at the expense of academic subjects. Even though there is a greater affinity with the formal and informal economy's needs, the graduates of these courses encounter difficulties in trying to gain access to further education, especially higher education.

In addition to these differences, what formal TVET has in common in many developing countries (and in the former colonial powers respectively) is a generally rather low social status (Deissinger 2003). The vocational training route is undertaken especially by young people from the

lower social strata and is considered a last resort for the disadvantaged to secure an income (Oketch 2007).

In general, a number of shortcomings are raised that are common to the vocational training sector in many countries (cf. Deissinger 2003: 5; DFID n.d.: 5; Georg 2006: 512; World Bank 2012: 176). The main issues are missing or inadequate links with the economy. Little practical relevance and out-dated curricula mean that vocational training often teaches out of step with the economy's real needs, qualifications are often not recognised and are correspondingly not very relevant to employment. Employers for their part often show hardly any interest in providing traineeships. The fragmentation of vocational training is also frequently considered a problem. This applies both to the administrative responsibility, which in many countries is divided among various ministries and bodies, as well as to the absence of comprehensive systems. Instead there is a coexistence of various forms of training, institutions, sponsors and individual measures, which extends from vocational training schools as part of the formal education system to various informal services all the way to forms of in-company vocational training. In West Africa, for example, traditional teaching continues to be the major form of vocational training. It is not standardised, however, and has no links with the formal education system. This means training opens up employment options only in the informal sector. Against this background, recent studies cast doubt on the poverty-reducing effect of vocational training (Colclough 2012; Palmer 2007).

The promotion of TVET was very important in the early stages of development cooperation. Since the 1980s, however, a focus on the primary school sector began to push vocational training promotion into the background. With the start of the EFA initiative in 1990 and even more so with the onset of the MDG process in 2000 many bilateral and multilateral donors stopped or reduced their funding of vocational training. One exception were German-speaking donors, whose continuous, albeit in some cases reduced focus on TVET is associated with the perceived success of vocational training systems in German-speaking countries.

In contrast to other western countries, vocational training in the Germanosphere has an assured social status. The dual system of training at school and on-the-job is today deemed to be one reason for the relatively low youth unemployment rates in German-speaking countries and is therefore considered a best practice model internation-

ally. There is increasing demand to implement dual system models in developing countries. However, experience of many years of bilateral development cooperation shows the limited transferability of the dual system (Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation 2011; Barabasch/Wolf 2011; World Bank 2012: 177; Maurer 2012). Both the educational traditions as well as the social environment are too different. In German-speaking countries vocational training is part of a historically rooted and specific form of social organisation of labour, which is essentially based on the cooperation between public administration, the education system, the private sector, professional associations and interest groups (Paul-Kohlhoff 1997) – an institutional setting that exists in very few developing countries.

Regardless of particular educational traditions, a number of international trends have emerged in TVET, which impact national systems to varying degrees. However, they have a strong influence on the specific strategies of major players in development policy, such as the World Bank. This is especially the trend to organise vocational training to ensure its prompt and flexible responsiveness to the economy's immediate needs. This demand-led reorientation of TVET is expected to solve the mismatch between the economy's actual demand for trained labour force and the skills provided in the existing TVET system, which often prove irrelevant. Moreover demand-led TVET is expected to have powerful effects both on the promotion of growth as well as on unemployment. From an educational point of view, this trend is accompanied by a tendency to detach vocational training from its traditional, education-specific roots. This applies both to its institutional setting (flexible modes of delivery instead of TVET as part of the formal education system) as well as fundamental conceptual matters – the educational mission to teach both cognitive and practical abilities as well as socially relevant knowledge is being increasingly replaced by the pragmatic objective of developing marketable, flexibly deployable "skills".

TVET as a contribution to improved living conditions in the informal sector is another issue of current debates in international development cooperation. A systematic analysis of approaches, strategies and goals has yet to be made in this sector, however. A major difficulty emerges from the conflicting priorities of being unable to neglect the informal sector on the one hand, especially if a contribution to poverty reduction is to be made. On the other hand, there is the risk of consolidating the informal struc-

tures leading to a stabilised “poverty industry”. Hence, the integration of the informal sector into the formal economy and a decrease in distance from the formal sector emerge as general goals (Georg 2006: 521).

SKILLS OR “BERUFE” 2? THE THEORETICAL DEBATE

It is no coincidence that the term “skills development” is increasingly displacing that of “vocational training” or “TVET”. Skills development refers in general to rather narrowly defined ways of preparing for jobs and is normally used in a decontextualised form without taking account of the interlinkages between training, the labour market’s structure, social policies, the social organisation of labour and overall issues of power (Allais 2011a: 2). Skills development is intended to prepare for a job, rather than for an occupation (in the German sense of “Beruf”). As such, the prominence of the term in the international debate may be interpreted as a reflection of an increasingly fragmented and flexible labour force (Allais 2011a: 7).

The international academic and political debate shows the strong influence of neoclassical economics on educational sciences (and even more so on the practical application of educational policy) (Allais 2011b). The international trend of demand-led skills development outlined above is based on the principles of transmitting competencies (competency-based TVET) and delivering employability. The institutional framework for this form of TVET in an increasing number of countries is the National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF), which has its origins in the UK. Skills or learning outcomes are to be defined by companies and other relevant players, which provide the basis for qualifications established in the NQF. The state’s role is to regulate private and public training providers in relation to the defined qualifications. The learners can choose from the NQF courses provided to improve their personal employability. Essentially, NQFs are a concept enshrined in neoliberal economic thinking (Avis 2012; Allais 2011b). Similar to current public sector reforms under neoliberal influence, the state’s role in vocational training changes in terms of regulating private training services instead of providing training. NQF oriented TVET reforms are not only intended to improve vocational training efficiency, but also to create a training market by abolishing the state monopoly. Basic assumptions reflect the thinking of neo-classical economics, namely that of reasonable decisions taken by rational individuals in a perfect (training) market

(Allais 2011b: 8f).

In addition to these dominant theoretical approaches, however, there is a debate in educational and social sciences that is comparable to the structuralist and neostructuralist approaches in economics. The focus here on the one hand is to root education concepts and policies in broader social contexts, especially social and labour market policies. On the other hand, these approaches emphasise the centrality of educational institutions alongside the institutional debate in neostructuralist economic approaches. The core and essence of education is understood as the teaching of knowledge and therefore enabling people to take part in a social power resource. This provision of social power-bestowing knowledge can only be achieved through strong educational institutions. This includes well-trained teachers, curricula based on knowledge rather than competencies and ultimately widely acknowledged perceptions of education, which see education as the right to social participation and not as an obligation for permanent self-marketing.

SKILLS FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?

Some hardly scrutinised assumptions in the development cooperation debate underlie the current interest in TVET or rather skills development. These include first of all the view that by providing trained employees, economic development can be induced and jobs created. This linear causal relationship has to be scrutinised, however (cf. Deisinger 2003; Allais 2011b; Georg 2006). Basically, it is to be assumed that vocational training measures only help in producing better employment opportunities if a corresponding economic demand for labour exists. Georg (2006: 515) describes the paradox that vocational training is most effective when unemployment is low in an economy, whereas it increasingly forfeits credibility in the opposite case.

Another assumption is that with the knowledge economy’s global spread the demand for skilled workers has risen sharply and that its absence would constitute a barrier to economic development. Critical approaches cast doubt on this in principle. Avis (2012: 3f) stresses that even in the West economic development has not created highly qualified, well-paid jobs on a broad scale but there is still great demand for low-skilled and low-paid jobs. Instead, he discusses the polarisation between highly skilled and low-skilled sectors, which he argues is also relevant for

sectors directly associated with the knowledge economy. Among knowledge workers he says there is a tendency towards “Digital Taylorism” (i.e. deskilling based on standardisation of previously skilled work processes via new technology) on the one hand and a well-trained and paid elite on the other. Chang (2010: 184) also points to the deskilling process due to the increasing use of technology, which is in contrast to the common belief of an increased need for skills due to the knowledge economy.

A third basic element of the current debate is the “mismatch hypothesis” that despite high unemployment, the need for skilled workers in the economy is unmet due to unsuitable (vocational) education. Firstly, it is dubious to define unemployment as a training problem, i.e. to allocate responsibility for it to the affected individuals and the education system, while the need for appropriate social and economic policies is not usually considered (Allais 2011b: 264). The causes of mismatching are far more complex. In developing countries particularly the emigration of well-trained workers is often a reason for a shortage of skilled people in certain sectors (Allais 2012).

The orientation of vocational training to the needs of the economy combined with the appropriate policy instruments (competency-based learning, learning outcomes and NQFs) is often cited as the response to the mismatch hypothesis. A study by the International Labour Organisation on the effects of NQFs in several industrial and developing countries (Allais 2010) raises doubts, however, as to both implementing them as well as their effectiveness. The study found that in hardly any country a better supply and demand balance between the TVET system and the respective labour market could be assessed. The NQFs did just as little to increase the participation of relevant business players in vocational training, whether by providing jobs or defining qualification standards.

In developing countries particularly, competency-based skills development often achieves the opposite of what is intended. These countries lack comprehensive, systematic structures of vocational training, such as institutions, programmes, and curricula. Competency-based forms of vocational training are, as experience shows, inadequate to meet this institutional backlog (Loose 2008 quoted in Allais 2011b).

In addition to these sobering experiences, more fundamental objections to this short-term, needs-based orientation of vocational training can also be raised. In essence,

it is based on an instrumentalised and reduced concept of knowledge and skills or abilities to be taught (Avis 2012: 7). Skills defined on the basis of immediate and short-term economic needs thus run the risk of not taking account of either the learning needs of young people or the necessities of sound economic development in the medium to long term. Rather, it seems the retention and improvement of the educational in TVET – understood as the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical skills – is the only opportunity to create qualifications with lasting value, which are capable of supporting the development of labour processes (Allais 2011a).

Beyond the above mentioned doubts about current reform trends, it is important to note that good vocational training can play an important role in economic development and reducing poverty. Also, there is certainly sufficient need to change current structures and functions. The question that should be asked, however, is under what circumstances can vocational training make a positive contribution. The orientation towards economic development is certainly necessary in principle. However, at the same time, this does not mean to abandon sound institutional anchorage of TVET systems as part of a functioning educational system. Nor does it mean that the teaching of knowledge and capabilities whose validity has a medium to long-term orientation has to be replaced by flexible modes of training programmes based on short-term skill needs. Instead, an adequate institutionalisation of TVET should be considered as a route to better quality and relevance. This means on the one hand dovetailing with development strategies in other sectors, especially with industry, social and labour market policies (see the article of Reiner/Staritz in this publication). Here it has to be clear that TVET cannot compensate for the negative social implications of deregulated labour markets, high unemployment and lack of job security plus poorly developed social services. Vocational training will be able to contribute to economic development and reducing poverty instead, if the appropriate policies are in place in the abovementioned sectors. The need to include relevant players in curriculum design and on-the-job training provisions should certainly involve not only industry associations and companies but also trade unions and non-governmental organisations. On the other hand, the task is to reinforce the educational core of TVET by well-defined curricula that do not dispense with theoretical content, proper training of teaching staff and the possibility to move freely between vocational and general education systems.

References

- Allais, Stephanie (2012): *Will skills save us? Rethinking the relationships between vocational education, skills development policies and social policy in South Africa*. In: *International Journal of Educational Development*, 32, 632-642.
- Allais, Stephanie (2011a): *What are skills? Rethinking the relationships between labour markets, social policy, and skills development*. Paper to be presented at the Global Labour University Conference 28-30 September 2011.
- Allais, Stephanie (2011b): 'Economics imperialism', education policy and educational theory. In: *Journal of Education Policy*, 27(2), 253-274.
- Allais, Stephanie (2010): *The implementation and impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: Report of a study in 16 countries*. International Labour Office, Skills and Employability Department. Geneva.
- Avis, James (2012): *Global reconstructions of vocational education and training*. In: *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 10(1), 1-11.
- Barabasch, Antje/Wolf, Stefan (2011): *Internationaler Policy Transfer in der Berufsbildung. Konzeptionelle Überlegungen und theoretische Grundlagen am Beispiel deutscher Transferaktivitäten*. In: *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*, 14, 283-307.
- Chang, Ha-Joon (2010): *23 things they don't tell you about capitalism*. London.
- Colclough, Christopher (2012): *Education outcomes reassessed*. In: Colclough, Christopher (ed.): *Education Outcomes and Poverty. A reassessment*. Abingdon, 154-170.
- Deissinger, Thomas (2003): *Probleme der formalen beruflichen Bildung in Entwicklungsländern*. In: *Der Überblick*, 39(1), 42-45.
- DFID (Hg.) (n.d.): *Guidance Note. Engaging the Private Sector in Skills Development. A DFID practice paper*.
- Georg, Walter (2006): *Berufsbildung in Entwicklungsländern*. In: Arnold, R./Lipsmeier, A. (ed.): *Handbuch der Berufsbildung*. Wiesbaden.
- Loose, Gert (2008): *Can we link and match training in the dual system with competency-based education and training (CBET)?* In: Loose, G./Spottl, G./Sahir, Y.: 'Reengineering' dual training – the Malaysian experience. Frankfurt.
- Maurer, Markus (2012): *Potenzial und Grenzen des dualen Modells in Entwicklungsländern*. In: *Panorama*, 6.
- Oketch, Moses O. (2007): *To vocationalise or not to vocationalise? Perspectives on current trends and issues in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in Africa*. In: *International Journal of Educational Development*, 27, 220-234.
- Palmer, Robert (2007): *Education, Training and Labour Market Outcomes in Ghana: A Review of the Evidence*. RECOUP Working Paper No. 9. University of Cambridge.
- Paul-Kohlhoff, Angela (1997): *Berufsausbildung und Weiterbildung*. In: Bernhard, Armin/Rothermel Lutz (ed.): *Handbuch kritische Pädagogik. Eine Einführung in die Erziehungs- und Bildungswissenschaften*. Weinheim.
- Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (2011): *SDC's Vocational Skills Development Activities. Evaluation 2011/12*. Bern.
- UNESCO (2012): *Youth and skills. Putting education to work. Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2012*. Paris.
- World Bank (2012): *World Development Report 2013: Jobs*. Washington D.C.

-
- 1 This article was translated from German by Conor McNamara.
 - 2 The German notion „Beruf“ corresponds to the specific form of social organisation of labour in the German speaking countries mentioned earlier. As general traits, a “Beruf” refers to a set of activities, capabilities and specific knowledge, requiring a certain degree of autonomy and encompassing whole and complex labour processes in contrast to single operations. “Berufe” are institutionally and socially recognised.