
This is the **accepted version** of the journal article:

Tarabini-Castellani, Aina; Jacovkis Halperin, Judith. «The Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers : An analysis of a hegemonic link between education and poverty». International Journal of Educational Development, Vol. 32 Núm. 4 (2012), p. 507-516. 10 pàg. DOI 10.1016/j.ijedudev.2012.02.014

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Postprint version of:

Tarabini A, Jacovkis J. (2012) The Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers: an analysis of the hegemonic link between education and poverty International Journal of Educational Development 4: 507-51

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0738059312000338?via%3Dihub>

Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers: analysing the hegemonic link between education and poverty

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Abstract

This paper has two main objectives. First, it aims to analyse the connections between education and poverty established by the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), as a central policy tool for the articulation of the Post Washington Consensus. Second, it intends to study how the PRSPs have been consolidated and expanded through different international organizations. With these objectives, the paper includes four sections: the first and second sections present the 'model of poverty' and the 'model of education' defined in the PRSPs. The third analyses how different international actors have adopted the PRSPs as a guide to orient their strategies and policies in the field of education, development and poverty reduction. The fourth and final section critically explores the current global development agenda and identifies some of its main challenges in terms of conceptualization and implementation.

Keywords: poverty reduction, educational policy, development, World Bank, hegemony, international donors.

1. Introduction

In 1999, the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) created the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). Since then, the PRSPs have become the main policy tool for the articulation of the Post-Washington Consensus (PWC). They enable poverty reduction to be brought to the core of development strategies, to create a new framework from which the relation with developing countries can be articulated and, most importantly, to expand the WB's influence not only in the countries dependent on its funding but also in the design of global priorities in the field of development.

The objective of the PRSPs is to define national strategies to promote broad

based economic growth and to reduce poverty. Simultaneously, they define the external financing needs in order to achieve the stated goals. Formally speaking, the content of each document is produced by developing countries trying to reflect their specific needs and features. In fact, the strategy underlining the PRSPs must include four principles: result-orientation, comprehensivity, country-guidance and participation. Consequently, this strategy perfectly fits in the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF), translating its general principles into specific action plans. Moreover, the PRSPs are explicitly defined as the “operational vehicles” of the CDF¹.

According to the Bank, both the CDF and the PRSPs are voluntary and do not entail any kind of conditionality or obligation. Each country must decide on, and own, its priorities and programs to reduce poverty, stimulate development and promote economic growth. Nevertheless, the WB sets clear instructions for developing countries to prepare their own national strategies. In fact, since 2002 the WB has published a detailed guide that defines the general approach for national PRSPs, their process of implementation and their principal components. This guide, entitled *Sourcebooks for Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers* (Klugman, 2002), is the inevitable frame of reference for developing countries to define their priorities, strategies and policies to reduce poverty (Bonal & Tarabini, 2009; Tarabini, 2010). Moreover, the PRSPs are considered by the Executive Boards of the IMF and WB to form the basis for concessional lending and debt relief under the joint Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative², thus becoming the main basis for articulating financial assistance to the poorest countries.

At the same time, it is important to highlight that the PRSPs have become the basic instrument for bilateral and multilateral agencies in the design of their development strategies (Bullard 2003; Caillods & Hallak 2004). In fact, the WB explicitly declares the double role that the PRSPs are expected to play: on the one hand,

¹The concept of CDF was coined by James Wolfenshon (president of the WB during the 2001-2005 period) to symbolize the change in the WB's priorities and strategies under the PWC. The CDF is defined as an attempt to make operative a holistic approach to development and to ensure the major effectiveness of poverty reduction. It also introduces changes to the WB's methodology of intervention, seeking a greater collaboration with NGO's, other international organisms and client countries in the design, planning and implementation of the projects. For more information see Wolfensohn (1999).

² The WB and the IMF initiated the HIPC Initiative in 1996. It is an agreement among official creditors (including bilateral, multilateral and commercial creditors) designed to help the poorest, most heavily indebted countries escape from unsustainable debt. In 1999 the initiative was enhanced, enabling a broader group of countries to be qualified to participate in it. The Enhanced HIPC Initiative intends to provide deeper, broader and faster debt relief and to strengthen the program's links to poverty reduction strategies. It is under the Enhanced Initiative that having an approved PRSP is an inevitable condition for any country to be eligible.

they have to assist the low-income countries in the design and implementation of their national strategies to reduce poverty. On the other hand, they have to guide international funding institutions in their strategies and practices in the field of development and poverty reduction. We can indeed argue that the PRSPs approach has been progressively consolidated as the global framework for development assistance. Simultaneously, other strategies to fight poverty have been encouraged under the CDF inspiration and are currently promoted by different international donors.

In this context, the objective of the paper is twofold: first, it aims to analyse the relation between poverty reduction and education policies established by the PRSPs, and specifically developed in the *Sourcebooks*. It is important to highlight that the PRSPs attribute a key role to education both for reducing poverty and for achieving development. Moreover, from our point of view, education, and specifically the connection between education and poverty, is a privileged entry point to analyse the construction of a global consensus around the social issues included in the development agenda. Therefore, this paper will argue that the PRSPs not only stimulate a specific framework of policies but also a broader political gaze on development, poverty reduction and education. This links the first aim with the second objective of the paper: that is, to explore how the PRSPs are “adopted” by different international organisms and agencies thus becoming hegemonic instruments in the definition and application of the global agenda both in education and in poverty reduction.

In order to do so, the paper is structured in 4 sections. The first section presents the “model of poverty” defined in the PRSPs, examining its explanatory and its normative framework. The second explores the “model of education” stated in the PRSPs, analysing the rationale for investing in the sector, the strategy to guide this investment and the recommended policies and measures. The third analyses how different actors have adopted the PRSPs as “common sense” in guiding their strategies and policies in the field of education, development and poverty reduction. The fourth critically explores, as a conclusion, the current global political agenda and identifies some of its main challenges in terms of conceptualization and implementation.

2. The PRSPs’ Poverty Model

Fighting poverty is, at the moment, one of the issues on the global agenda on which broadest consensus has been reached by the international community (Noël, 2006). Several documents, undersigned by a large representation of States and International

Organizations have been produced at least since the publication of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, a primary target of which is the eradication of poverty and hunger by 2015. At almost the same time, the WB published the *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking poverty* (World Bank, 2001) and the above mentioned *Sourcebooks* of the PRSPs (Klugman 2002).

Poverty is, obviously, a fundamental element throughout the *Sourcebooks*. It is conceptualised both in the Preface (Klugman, 2002) and in the First Chapter (Aline et. al., 2002), whereas the rest of the Chapters raise the relationship between poverty and other central areas, both in economic and political terms. In order to structure this section we will first analyse the definition of poverty constructed by the documents³ and secondly we will suggest some normative implications derived from it.

2.1. Poverty definition, dimensions and main related sectors.

Broadening the economic view that is characteristic of the WB's academic and non-academic production during recent decades (World Bank, 1990), the PRSPs develop a definition of poverty related to the lack of certain dimensions of welfare: opportunities, capabilities, security and empowerment. These dimensions widen the definition to non monetary-aspects, which are added to the monetary ones already raised in previous documentation. Nevertheless, the PRSPs do not add much to the conceptualization of poverty with respect to the changes introduced by the WDR 2000/01⁴.

Further on in the text we will develop these dimensions from a normative point of view. Before doing so, however, it is important to underline three general aspects present in the definition of poverty. Firstly, the definition of poverty / welfare provided by the PRSPs comes together with the establishment of thresholds, which mark the border between poverty and non-poverty, and with the construction of indicators to measure these shortcomings. In this sense, it is interesting to stress that throughout the analysed documents, the use of technical vocabulary grounded on proceedings is recurrent, but there are few references to the political debates that collect the concern for the 'social question' (Castel, 1997) or the contradictions between capitalism and welfare (Offe, 1990). On the contrary, a poverty consensus view (even though broad) is

³The analysis will be mainly focused on the Preface and the Chapter 1 of the *Sourcebooks*, although other complementary documents will be necessary in order to draw the PRSPs 'poverty model' (i.e. WDR 2000/01, other chapters of the *Sourcebooks*).

⁴The capabilities dimension is not included in the WDR 2000/2001. However, the opportunities include the elements that define this dimension in the PRSPs.

given, and the technical arguments are emphasized at the expense of political ones⁵.

Secondly, in spite of the new elements in this definition, there are not many aspects of poverty related to distribution issues. In this sense, the PRSPs tackle the inequality *within* poor families and *between* poor groups, but the distribution of resources including the whole society is mentioned in a much more superficial manner. Thus, the adopted view is fundamentally a technical one: the concern is centred around the ability to measure and evaluate inequality and to develop valid measurement instruments for the elaboration of policies and for international comparison.

Thirdly, the difficulties establishing a causal relation between economic growth and poverty reduction are recognised within the documents (Ames et al, 2002: 5). Then, which is the core aim: to reduce poverty by achieving economic growth or to economically grow by reducing poverty? As we have argued elsewhere, “high inequality is not only harmful to the poor, but it also hinders economic growth (...). In this context, equity is good for the poor because it is good for growth. That is the logic that leads the WB to be worried about inequality - its possible negative effects on growth” (Tarabini, 2010: 211). This can be complemented by Fine et al. (2001) or Øyen’s (2000) contributions, which have stressed the lack of analysis focussed on power or on class inequalities and of stronger redistribution proposals.

Public policies / sustainable growth actions and the reduction of poverty are the core of public action in the PRSPs. Four content areas are delimited: a) macroeconomic and structural policies; b) improvements in governance; c) appropriate sectoral policies and programs (i.e. education and sanitary policies); and d) realistic costing and appropriate levels of funding for the major programs (Klugman, 2002: 4). In spite of each country having to re-contextualize these areas to its own reality, the four of them are *sine qua non* conditions for achieving the WB Board's approval to develop the PRSPs.

Moreover, although the four areas are supposed to be developed simultaneously, all poverty reduction strategies must be inevitably associated to macroeconomic variables. In fact, before having its PRSP approved by the WB's Board, the country needs a favourable IMF evaluation of its macroeconomic structure. In this

⁵This is not to say that there is no political view underlying the documents, but that the kind of arguments used are more technical than political (see Nustad 2000 for a WDR 2000/01 analysis in these terms). In this respect, a non-conflictive narration of the social and historical processes is constructed in such a way that the improvement of the social conditions is not presented as the result of social fights but as “social benefits” so that conflicts of interests are neutralized (Noël, 2006).

respect, and despite the broader view of poverty, it can be observed that economic growth is still the core variable for the explanation of the increase or the decrease in poverty. As the WB explicitly declares: “economic growth remains the single most important factor influencing poverty, and macroeconomic stability is essential for high and sustainable rates of growth” (Ames et al, 2002: 4). However, it is also recognized that “policies that promote economic growth are central to poverty reduction, but social protection measures also have a role to play in reducing the vulnerability and protecting the welfare of the poor” (Coudouel, 2002: 164).

Therefore, even after explicitly recognizing the limitations of the trickle-down strategies, introducing other complementary elements to the economic growth and rejecting a mechanical relation between growth and poverty reduction, economic growth is still the central issue to consider in order to improve poor people's living conditions. Then, the explanation of the failure of these strategies is focused on the incorrect performance by national and sub-national institutions and, consequently, what is needed is to correct these errors without changing the fundamental lines of the reform strategy (Alú et al., 2006: 44s). And that is why Social Protection policies are of a strong compensatory character.

In this way, problem presentation (bad macroeconomic performance as a consequence of problems related to institutional quality that hinder the improvement of poor people's quality of life) comes together, implicit or explicitly, with a set of solutions (Therien, 1999-2006). However, as it has been mentioned above, the identification of the causes is not very clear and mixes both causes and characteristics. For example: “the risks that poor people face as a result of their circumstances are the cause of their vulnerability” (World Bank, 2001: 36). With the same variables one can say that people are poor because they are exposed to a broad range of sources of instability, and not that they are exposed to them because of their circumstances. Thus, they talk about causes of poverty in terms of the elements that characterize it and not in terms of the processes that generated these characteristics.

2.2. Normative implications of the articulation of definitions and concepts

To develop this analysis we will focus our attention on the welfare dimensions already mentioned: opportunities, capabilities, security and empowerment, underlying some of the most relevant aspects for each of them. Although the four dimensions will be presented independently, it is necessary to stress they are embedded in a unique

discursive scheme that articulates the same and relates them to other issues that will be also mentioned.

First, opportunities are measured by the distance existing between the income or consumption level of the analysis unit (be it an individual, a family, a territorial unit, etc.) and the poverty line defined at state scale. The thresholds, as Álvarez Leguizamón (2005) has argued, establish minimums which allow survival but little more and, in any case, define a system of basic needs (in relation to which the threshold is set) whose consequence is the differentiation between the poor people's world (where their cultural and biological characteristics persist) and that of those who are not poor. In educational terms, we will see how public responsibility is almost limited to providing primary education to the poor population, as if it was enough for them to escape poverty. In this respect, one could ask to what extent the specialist teams that define these needs would consider their own necessities to have been satisfied if they were in a position just above the line they have drawn.

Secondly, capabilities refer to the abilities or skills that one person has in order to achieve good results in different areas (special emphasis is placed on education and sanitary areas). This definition, that adds to Sen's (2000) contributions, gives a complementarity view to the opportunities approach and stimulates the conversion from poor people's shortcomings to their assets (Álvarez Leguizamón, 2005). Therefore, the initial conditions are not as important as the capability of individuals to make the most of their assets to improve their own situation. The proposed equation defends that the lack of capabilities in areas like education, health or nutrition, results in a low level of income and/ or consumption. It seems reasonable to ask to what extent this causal relationship takes this direction and not the opposite: in countries with a low level of public services, a lack of income could result in low education levels, poor nutrition, etc. According to this diagnosis, the concern about the equality of opportunities is in some manner replaced by a focus on the equality of capabilities and, thus, the responsibility is more located on the individuals than on the institutions.

Third, lack of security is the risk of deterioration of one's welfare. This risk is both environmental and human, and that is why the documents talk about emergency plans to deal both with flooding and with long term situations of misery. It is stressed that poor people are proportionally more sensitive to that risk because they spend a larger fraction of their resources on covering basic needs, but the role played by these macroeconomic processes in generating poverty conditions, and in producing poverty,

is not recognised. In consequence, the solutions suggested are related to compensating for the negative effects of macroeconomic processes but not to changing them. Within the educational proposals, this accent can be detected in the concern about the consequences of dropout in times of economic crisis (to which the poor are more “sensitive” and “risky”) instead of being concerned about the causes of this crisis and how to avoid them. Again, the focus is placed on the capabilities of poor people to face the risk more than on the institutional ability to prevent it. Moreover, the topic of security seems sometimes be more related to the risks of instability that a worsening of poor people's conditions could suppose for the 'rest of society' than to the security of vulnerable groups themselves.

Finally, empowerment refers to poor people's access to public institutions, public processes and state processes. There are two clearly separate sides. The first refers to the opening-up of public processes and to administrative transparency. The second stresses poor people's ability to participate in such processes. Regarding this issue, the key concept seems to be social capital. The proposals elaborated in this area are aimed at stimulating the process of the poor population's self-organization, their ability to mobilize in order to claim their rights, etc. As Øyen (2002) has discussed, the usefulness of social capital to drive poverty reduction strategies is not particularly clear since it is aimed at reinforcing the nexuses *among* poor people but seems to forget the importance of those they have outside of their own social group. These connections are, precisely, the ones that can improve social cohesion by stimulating the interaction between different social groups and inter-class solidarity, and not only class solidarity. Therefore, these proposals do not seem to do any more than increase the distance between the poor and non-poor people's worlds, since they reinforce a partial vision of the problem: the existence of a poor sector does not compromise society as a whole, but rather only those who are in this unfavourable situation, and these are the people that have to self-organize themselves in order to 'escape' poverty. In the field of education this could be exemplified by the requirements established by public administrations to the poor communities in order for them to receive public resources. One of the most common requirements in this sense is the request for self-organisation in order to promote educational projects in their schools.

3. The PRSPs' educational model

Investment in education is a crucial element in any strategy to reduce poverty.

According to the Bank, it not only generates economic benefits such as increasing salaries, productivity and growth, but also produces social benefits related to social cohesion, political participation or even fertility and health. But, if education is so crucial to fight poverty, how should this investment be guided? And what are the WB's recommendations for leading educational priorities and policies within the national strategies to reduce poverty?

In order to address these questions we will analyse the chapter on education contained in the *Sourcebooks* (Aoki et al, 2002). This chapter is a highly detailed guide drawing the best educational policies and practices for poverty reduction and it provides diagnostic tools to help countries identify the policies most likely to maximize the impact of education on economic growth and poverty reduction. The analysis will allow to draw the “educational model” defined by the WB in the field of poverty reduction, and to identify both its main features and its main differences and similarities with the previous WB's proposals in the educational sector.

3.1. Rationale to invest in education and reform strategies

Without any doubt, the PRSPs educational rationale is guided by the human capital theory. Investment in education makes it possible to empower the poor, to enlarge their opportunities and to increase their capacity to create income and participate in economic growth. As a consequence, any strategy to reduce poverty should remove obstacles and facilitate access to education and training for the poor. Moreover, primary education is still understood as the area with the highest rate of return and therefore, the educational level to be prioritized.

In coherence with this view, the WB's proposals to reform the education sector of low-income-countries are mainly focused on primary schooling. Specifically they address three main areas: 1) expanding supply; 2) improving quality; and 3) stimulating demand. According to the Bank, the success of these strategies is necessarily related to the application of cost-effective and better-targeted programs. In this sense, any national diagnosis of the education system should primarily account for the costs and the effectiveness of public policies, seeking to prioritize those policies with higher impacts and lower costs.

Thus, the basic rationale to invest in education is completely coherent with the WB's education sector strategies developed in the nineties. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the education chapter of the *Sourcebooks* also introduces new

elements to the WB's educational agenda. Some of these "novelties" are the following: 1) more importance is attributed to secondary and tertiary education; 2) more emphasis is located on learning and not only on access; and 3) more attention is directed towards the equity of schooling. In order to assess whether these new elements are able to depart from the WB's education agenda of the nineties and articulate a "new model" of education investment it is necessary to analyse how these reform strategies are articulated in specific educational programs and measures.

3.2. Priority programs and policies

The policy proposals recommended by the WB attribute key importance to three main issues: 1) teachers and teaching, 2) provision and funding, and 3) efficiency, efficacy and accountability. These topics appear repeatedly throughout the three areas of concern defined by the WB - expanding supply, improving quality and stimulating demand. At the same time, key importance is attributed to targeting policies, appearing as the fourth topic within the key education policy options. Targeting, however, is restricted to the area of stimulating demand and therefore is not as pervasive as the previous ones.

First of all, and following the WB' recommendations of previous decades, key importance is attributed to teachers and teaching both in terms of improving the supply of education and increasing the quality of schooling. In terms of the supply, and in order to enlarge it in a cost-effective manner, the WB proposes reducing the duration of teacher's pre-service formal training, rationalizing the assignment of teachers to schools or developing strategies for lowering the cost of teacher preparation and recruiting. Moreover, according to the Bank, one of the reasons that explain the difficulties to expand the education system is the high level of teachers' salaries. As we have said above, a specific presentation of the problems implies a specific set of solutions. And this is more than clear in the present case: the exclusive focus in the effectiveness of the salaries generates an omission of its redistributive impact (Øyen, 2000), especially in a typically vulnerable group as the teachers in poor countries.

Exactly the same happens in terms of the quality of schooling, where teachers' salaries are again identified as a crucial item to be reviewed in national policies, proposing the reallocation of public expenditure on non-salary inputs such as books and learning materials. Along with this proposal, the WB recommends to improve teacher training and in-service professional development, introducing new teaching methods and tightening the mechanisms of accountability and evaluation systems.

Of course, the possibility of expanding the supply of good quality primary education depends on the availability of teachers and the quality of their education. Nevertheless, the WB's proposals in this area, and specifically those proposals related to teachers' salaries and labour conditions, are likely to put this objective at risk. Following Klees, we can argue that the Bank "does not take teacher needs seriously" (Klees, 2002: 464). Moreover, it can be argued that in spite of the importance attributed to teachers in educational improvement what seems to be missing in the PRSPs is a comprehensive view of the processes of teaching and learning (Caillods & Hallak, 2004). Teachers are basically required to produce measurable outputs and results; "what is important is *what works*" (Ball, 2007: 222). They are the main party responsible for ensuring the performance of the system but no conditions are guaranteed to make this feasible.

Secondly, great emphasis is located on educational funding and provision. According to the Bank, there is a non-linear relation between the expenditure on education and the performance of the system, since equal expenditures on education often produces different outcomes. Given this situation, the main challenge in this area is not to increase the public resources spent on education but to improve their returns (Aoki et al, 2002: 237). In order to do so, key importance is attributed to the private provision and financing of education. Private education is considered crucial not only to cost-effectively expand the educational coverage but also to improve the quality of the system and even to stimulate the demand.

On the one hand, private investment in education is seen as an imperative requirement for low-income countries to expand the supply of secondary and tertiary levels of schooling. In this sense, although the WB recognizes the importance of secondary education it does so by encouraging the major presence of the private sector in post-primary levels of schooling.

On the other hand, private providers are considered key actors to improve the quality of education. As it is explicitly declared in the document "involving NGO or for-profit private providers in basic education can lead to better quality of education, by mobilizing available management capacity, providing more choice for families and possibly increasing competition among providers" (Aoki et al, 2002: 256). As can be seen, the concept of quality used by the WB is highly restricted and basically linked to competitiveness and efficiency.

Finally, some proposals are aimed at stimulating the demand of schooling by

mobilizing the private sector, such as offering grants to poor students in order for them to study in private schools. Nevertheless, other proposals with a different “nature” are developed within this area. These are for example targeted stipends for girls, conditional cash transfers for poor students or even the elimination of school fees in primary education to ensure the affordability of schooling for poor families. Without a doubt, these proposals are the most innovative, and clearly reflect the new emphasis of the WB on equity. However, it seems this emphasis is still monopolised by the primary level.

The third topic that constantly appears in the WB's proposals for education, is efficiency, efficacy and accountability. Several proposals appear under this area, most of them oriented to enhance the quality of schooling. Interestingly enough, and contradicting all the pedagogical recommendations in this field, the class size is considered a spurious variable with regards to the quality of schooling. In fact, the WB explicitly declares that “lowering average class size below 40 should not be a priority use of resources in low-income countries” (Aoki et al, 2002: 256) and it follows by saying that “teachers can effectively use more interactive pedagogy even in classes of more than 50 children” (Aoki et al, 2002: 257). Simultaneously, but just in reverse terms, a direct relation is established between higher autonomy and decentralization and higher educational quality. Indeed, the case for decentralization and school autonomy is presented as a merely technical question, omitting again the political and ideological debate surrounding this issue.

Within the measures oriented to improve the efficiency of the education system, the WB is also pushing for introducing the so-called New Public Management methods in public schools. As Ball indicates, this “new management panopticism” (Ball, 2007: 219) represents the insertion of a new mode of power into the public sector that plays a key role in replacing the professional-ethical regimes with entrepreneurial-competitive regimes. Moreover, according to Olssen et al (2004) “in its contemporary form, managerialism is preoccupied, if not obsessed, with the notion of quality. Quality has become a powerful metaphor for new forms of managerial control” (Olsen, et al, 2004: 191). And without any doubt this is the notion of quality that drove the PRSPs proposals as a whole.

The last crucial topic emerging in the Sourcebooks’ chapter on education is targeting. Targeting policies are considered of crucial relevance in order to stimulate the demand for education and relieve the households’ constraints to invest in education. The objective of these policies is to guarantee access by the most vulnerable sectors to the

primary education system. With this purpose they include a huge variety of measures such as school health and nutrition programs, conditional cash transfers or provision of school materials to target groups. At the same time, and in accordance with the EFA and the MDGs, special attention is provided to promote the education of girls.

In fact, the variety of measures designed to stimulate the demand for schooling in terms of the most vulnerable sectors do nothing more than consolidate and enlarge the importance attributed to targeting programmes in the nineties. According to the Bank, targeting is the best measure for simultaneously guaranteeing efficiency and equity in the allocation of resources and it is therefore a mechanism to be prioritized in any strategy to reduce poverty. Nevertheless, the WB again ignores the political dimension of these measures and the variety of modalities to understand and to apply targeting –and of course the different potential impacts these differences could have⁶. Targeting is presented as a purely technical, objective and rational decision ignoring the politics embedded in this design and application.

We can conclude therefore that the “short policy menu” (Heyneman, 2003) dominating the WB’s education policy in the eighties and the nineties is still governing the agenda, although it has been extended and to some extent modified. It is true that more emphasis has been attributed to equity-driven reforms and to improving students’ learning outcomes. At the same time, at least theoretically, the importance has been recognized of post-basic levels of education in order to reduce poverty. Nevertheless, primary education continues to be the main education level to be prioritized in any strategy to reduce poverty. Simultaneously, competitive and finance-driven reforms, such as privatization, decentralization, effectiveness or accountability of the education system are still the bases to guide any policy and measure in the education sector of developing countries.

4. International Organisations and the PRSPs

This section analyses how different international organisms and agencies have adopted the PRSPs and have led them to the top of the global agenda on development and fighting poverty. We have selected four relevant international actors, and specifically those of its areas related to development and the fight against poverty. These actors are: the European Union (Directorate General for Development -DG DEV), the Organisation

⁶See Tarabini 2008a with regards to the pros and cons of targeting programmes and measures.

for Economic Co-operation and Development (Development Co-operation Directorate and Development Assistance Committee –DCD-DAC), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

4.1. The European Union and the PRSPs

The European Union is a crucial actor in the global architecture of aid development. Since the mid nineties the European Commission (EC) has become the **largest multilateral donor** in the world, surpassing the leading role of the WB –specifically the International Development Association (IDA) – in this area⁷ (Lethinen, 2003; IDA, 2007). The Union’s development policy, in fact, has expanded gradually by enlarging the countries, the thematic areas and the mechanisms by which aid development is provided. Nowadays, it covers developing countries all over the world; it addresses sectoral development policies in a wide variety of areas such as governance, human rights, migration or commercial development; and it uses several modalities of aid delivery including the project approach, sector wide approach and budgetary support.

The key role of the Directorate General for Development of the European Commission as regards international development aid explains our focus on this organism and our interest in knowing the reasons and the ways by which it has adopted the PRSPs as a key mechanism to guide both its approach and its intervention in the field of development and poverty reduction. In fact, the EC has explicitly declared its will to align its own development strategies with the PRSPs and to collaborate closely with the Bretton Woods Institutions in the implementation of development activities (Lethinen, 2003). In this context, the two main questions to be addressed are why and how has it decided to form this collaboration.

First of all, it is important to highlight two elements that are openly stressed by the EC and the WB: 1) the greater effectiveness of working together and 2) the shared goals with regards development and poverty reduction. On the one hand, both institutions declare that working together is a crucial element in order to deliver aid in a more effective manner and to enlarge the impacts of their actions. In fact, since the Paris Declaration, coordination, harmonization and alignment have been basic principles

⁷The IDA’s share of total multilateral ODA declined from 42 percent in 1970 to an average of 20 percent from 2001-2005 (IDA, 2007). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the still predominant role of the WB in areas such as education, where the IDA is the biggest provider of official development assistance (ODA) to the sector (UNESCO, 2009).

guiding the intervention of international donors in the field of development. On the other hand, both institutions share the objective of reducing poverty as the main aim of their intervention. As is declared in the *European Consensus on Development*: “the primary and overarching objective of EU development policy is the eradication of poverty” (EC, 2005: 5).

Moreover, it is important to highlight the existence of a strategic framework agreement between the EC and the WB. This agreement, first signed in 2001 and updated in 2009, makes it possible to finance many joint operations between the two organisms, basically through parallel or co-financing and trust fund agreements. The framework agreement has facilitated the creation of 41 parent trust funds (out of a total of 93 parent trust funds established at the Bank over the last 20 years). Furthermore, in the 2001-2005 period, the EC was the second largest contributor to the WB’s trust fund programmes. Beyond the financial cooperation, the EC-WB collaboration entails an agreed set of principles, conditions, requirements and responsibilities both in geographic and thematic areas, such as debt, education or trade⁸.

Secondly, we will identify and briefly explain some of the main ways through which the EC has adopted the PRSPs, both “internally” – that is, in the EU’s programming in the field of development – and in its relation with developing countries –that is, in the preparation and implementation of their strategies to reduce poverty and assist development. Of course, these two questions are highly interrelated.

On the one hand, the PRSPs have become one of the main bases of EU programming under the European Development Fund (EDF). The EDF is the main instrument for providing Community aid for development cooperation in the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states and overseas countries and territories (OCTs). It is an extra-budgetary fund -i.e. it is funded by the Member States and not by the overall EU budget- conducted for multi-annual periods (the 2008-2013 period corresponds to the 10th EDF) that consists of grants, risk capital and concessional loans. Under the EDF framework, the EC has elaborated specific programming guidelines for developing countries to define and plan their strategies to reduce poverty and achieve development. Country strategy papers (CSP) and regional strategy papers (RSP) have been adopted by the Commission, which is in charge of harmonising the programming guidelines, providing support and guidance in the preparation of strategic documents and making

⁸For more information see: <http://www.worldbank.org/eu>

recommendations for draft strategic documents. In this context, the EC has decided to use the PRSPs as the main basis for its Country Strategy Papers, thus becoming the inevitable framework for defining both national and regional priorities and strategies.

On the other hand, the PRSPs have become the main basis for articulating the relation between the EC and developing countries and specifically for preparing and implementing their strategies to reduce poverty. Some of the main examples of that are the regular meetings, committees and learning events organised between the EC and the WB with regards the PRSPs (Lethinen, 2003) and the operational coordination between both institutions in some selected pilot countries.

Consequently, it can be concluded that the EC has adopted the PRSPs as something to be taken for granted; as the main mechanism through which it defines and plans its poverty reduction strategies.

4.2. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the PRSPs

Since its creation in 1960, the OECD has defined its main goals as the promotion of economic development within its member countries and around the world through strategic co-operation, and the expansion of the multilateral world trade. Within this framework, we will focus our attention on the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) the main function of which is to coordinate the Official Development Assistance (ODA) of the OECD members and other international donors. This specialised committee is linked to the General Secretariat by the Development Co-operation Directorate (DCD), which is usually considered the DAC secretariat. Currently, the DAC has 23 members (several OECD countries and the Commission of the European Communities) and their representation on the Committee is composed of staff of the Foreign Affairs Ministries, of the national Co-operation Agencies or even of some Banks.

Our main interest in the DAC lies in the influence it has in guiding the OECD members' donations to developing countries and, specifically, in its capacity for framing the strategies to fight poverty that its members support. It is important to point out that the DAC government members are responsible for around 90% of the world's entire ODA (OECD-DAC, 2007).

To accomplish its main function, the DAC produces several documents (guidelines, good practice papers or peer reviews) which aim to coordinate the ODA

and standardise donors' practices under the principles of the Paris Declaration and, thus, national ownership, harmonization, alignment and effectiveness are strongly stressed. In this respect, the DAC shares with its main international partners -the WB, the IMF and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)-, the rationale to deal with poverty inducing developing countries to improve their performance in the economic area, both nationally and internationally through different country-level strategic development frameworks (OECD-DAC, 2001a: 71ss)⁹. The strong relation it maintains with these organisations is reflected in their participation as observers in the DAC's meetings and in their belonging to the DAC's Network on Poverty Reduction (POVNET), which is one of its subsidiary bodies. POVNET is presently focusing precisely on the study of ways of "increasing the impact of economic growth on poverty reduction"¹⁰. Like POVNET, other DAC written productions also stress the relationship between economic growth and poverty in a similar manner to the PRSPs' Sourcebooks. Thus, the Guidelines on Poverty Reduction are based in the following: several institutional deficiencies lead to inadequate economic growth, which is the main cause of poverty (OECD-DAC, 2001a: 43). Since this kind of explanation is assumed, and the 'model' of poverty and of the adequate strategies to deal with it are shared between the DAC and the PRSPs' suggestions (OECD-DAC, 2001a), it can be argued that the DAC's orientation fits well with that of the PRSPs, and so they are considered an adequate framework for achieving the MDGs (OCDE-DAC, 2005: 5).

As it has been already said, the DAC produces several documents aimed at improving coordinated and standardised behaviour among donors. This is specified through examples of good practices, specific orientation to donors' aid or peer reviews between DAC's members. We cannot look in much depth at the different recommendations in this text; so we will only note some examples of the orientation these documents adopt in relation to the PRSPs.

Due to the emphasis on country-led strategies, there are many references to the difficulties the donors have to face in order not to interfere with national and sub-national decisions (OECD-DAC, 2001a, 2005). In this sense, the need is stressed to be

⁹Examples of these country-level strategic development frameworks are the National Strategies for Sustainable Development and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework's Common Country Assessment (both promoted by different United Nations Agencies) or the Comprehensive Development Framework and the PRSPs. It is interesting to point out that the latter is the more extensively explored within the DAC's documents and is also the typical example used to illustrate the importance of co-ordination and holistic approaches (OECD-DAC, 2001, 2005)

¹⁰http://www.oecd.org/departement/0,2688,en_2649_34621_1_1_1_1_1,00.html. Last visit on 19th of June, 2009.

receptive to national contexts and rhythms, to elaborate mid or long-term poverty reduction strategies and to coordinate bilateral and multilateral aid in order not to overlap actions and hence decrease the efficiency of the assistance. It is also pointed out how convenient it would be to reduce and carefully select financial conditionalities. To improve monitoring, accountability and evaluation processes they strongly recommend aid budget orientation rather than project orientation. This will better reflect the priorities established by the poverty reduction strategy defined at the national scale.

At the same time, the DAC emphasises the PRSPs orientation towards improving economic growth by encouraging openness to privatisation processes and by recommending that its members strengthen the connections they have with private organisations and enterprises (OECD-DAC, 2005: 6). Following the same aim, the DAC also stresses the importance of better engaging the PRSPs with the Integrated Framework for Trade (IF) strengthening, once again, the links between trade, economic growth/development and reduction of poverty.

4.3 The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the PRSPs

The IDB is a regional financial institution created in 1959 within the framework of the Organisation of American States (OAS). The creation agreement was undersigned by 18 American countries, but nowadays its members are not only American. Non American members and some of the American ones (USA, Canada) cannot receive financial aid from the institution but they can participate in its activities by investing in the bank's resources or by providing services for the IDB financed programs. All of the borrowing members belong to Latin America and the Caribbean area. At the moment, the IDB has 48 members, 26 of which are borrowing ones. Altogether, the latter represent 50.02% of the voting power while the USA represents 30.01%. This percentage is established in accordance with the amount of capital contributed by each country to the IDB.

Since 1995, when the Eighth Replenishment of Resources came into effect, the IDB has re-defined its priorities by reinforcing the importance of the strategies aimed at reducing poverty and promoting social equity¹¹. Nevertheless, economic growth is still a priority in their strategies (IDB, 2004: 9s) and the Bank itself has recognised its difficulties for integrating and prioritizing poverty actions in its activities (IDB, 2003:

¹¹The IDB has strategically replenished its resources eight times. Every one of these replenishments has involved some changes in the priorities of the IDB's activities. In fact, the reduction of inequalities already was on the Bank's agenda before, but it is in this agreement that this issue, together with the reduction of poverty, came to the frontline of priority actions.

14).

Our interest in IDB is mainly based on three reasons. First of all, due to its extensive trajectory both in spatial and temporal terms, the Bank is a very sound institution in the Latin American and Caribbean area and has developed social actions in almost all countries in the region. Secondly, the fact that the IDB is a financial institution with two highly differentiated roles (borrowers and non-borrowers) enables to look at developing and donor countries at the same time. Last, but not least, the way in which the IDB has adopted and assumed different aspects of the PRSPs offers an interesting entry point for the analysis of the articulation between the WB and other international organisations through these strategic papers.

The IDB started supporting the PRSPs process as early as 1999. As shown in many of its documents (IDB, 2001, 2003, 2004), the Bank broadly agrees with the general rationale that guides the PRSPs both in the conceptualisation of poverty and in the proposed actions to tackle it. So, despite having detected some risk derived from an excessively broad definition of 'multidimensionality' which could lead to such a situation as 'all is fighting against poverty' (IDB, 2003), they share with the WB most of the terminology used in the Sourcebooks (emphasis on capabilities and opportunities, on effectiveness, accountability, governance, evaluation and provision of basics). They have also considered the PRSPs to be an example of a good strategy based on aims and goals (although they have their own poverty reduction strategies) and of the way in which multilateral aid should be coordinated (IDB, 2003, 2004). In fact, they consider the MDGs to be for the global scale what the PRSPs are to the national one.

Maybe the most emphasised aspects of the PRSPs by the IDB are related to country-led and participatory processes and to the changes these strategies imply for the Bank's own structure and organisation. Let us just mention some aspects for each.

In order to improve the development of the PRS in those countries engaged in the HIPC Initiative which belongs to the IDB, the Bank provides technical support and orientation through non-reimbursable assistance. Moreover, although the Bank is not part of the HIPC approval process, it "is/will be the major single donor both for debt relief and subsequent concessional lending" in its influence area (IDB, 2003: 18). Through this support its aim is to facilitate the country-led process of elaborating the PRS, and thus helping the countries to become responsible for the welfare of their own citizens and economic performance.

Participation is also dealt with by the Bank's members that are engaged in the

PRSPs process, although it is not an important item in the IDB's own poverty reduction programs. It has therefore stressed the need to finance (by the Bank and other IFIs) the consultation processes in order to improve the participatory aspects of elaborating the PRSPs (IDB, 2001). Other funds must be aimed at improving the monitoring and evaluation processes and the indicators they require.

Finally, the IDB has underlined the benefits of the participatory process within its own organisation, taking the WB as an example. The diffusion of documentation as well as reviews and criticism of the same will help improve transparency and civil society's control over the whole process and over the totality of actors involved. The effectiveness of the actions has to be increased both by the countries and the donors. In this respect, the Bank entrusts itself to better incorporate the integral aims of reducing poverty into its practices (elaboration of country strategies, discussion of policies, etc.) in order for there to be no increase in disconnected actions that are not included in broader strategic plans to fight against poverty.

4.4 The UNESCO, the EFA and the PRSPs

UNESCO is the only Post-war organism with an explicit educational mandate. It was created with the aim to playing a privileged role in the international education agenda and in the design of education policies for development (Chabott, 1998). Nevertheless, since its beginning the UNESCO has had to face several problems and limitations related both to the lack of funding and to the lack of agreement between its member countries. These problems have made it impossible to set and develop its leading role in the field of educational development (Mundy 1998). In fact and according to Jones (1990), UNESCO has been working since the 50s as a "people to people organisation", focused on fostering exchanges, deliberations and conferences instead of developing large-scale education programs (Jones, 1990: 50). So, although UNESCO is the *de iure* organisation in global educational multilateralism, the WB has progressively become the *de facto* leading organism in this field (Tarabini, 2008b).

The main reason to explain our interest in UNESCO –apart of course from its explicit education mandate- is the struggle for hegemony that, since the first decades of its creation, it has maintained with the WB in the field of education. A struggle that is clearly reflected in the EFA movement and that ends with the WB's supremacy in the field of global education development.

UNESCO in fact played a key role in the First EFA Forum (Jomtien, 1990),

being assigned to coordinate the agencies involved in the process – WB, UNPD and UNICEF-, to document the evolution of the process and to gather and publish reports, data and statistics. Consequently, the EFA Movement represented for UNESCO the possibility to recover its leadership in the field of global educational multilateralism (Chabbott, 1998; Jones and Coleman, 2005). Nevertheless, the more the process advanced the more the inability of UNESCO to develop this role was demonstrated. UNESCO has been widely criticized for its lack of capacity to mobilize both technical and financial resources to achieve the EFA goals. At the same time, international organisms, bilateral donors and non-governmental agencies have agreed in viewing the UNESCO as incapable of developing the role of general coordinator of the initiative. In this context, it has been necessary to recognise that the WB needed to take a stronger role in the process. A role in fact that the WB wished to assume (Rose, 2003). The best example of this process is undoubtedly the EFA Fast Track Initiative (FTI).

The FTI was launched in 2002 as a global partnership between donors and developing countries in order to ensure accelerated progress towards the EFA goals and specifically towards the MDG of universal primary education by 2015. One of the main purposes of the Initiative was to achieve greater coordination and harmonisation between bilateral and multilateral donors in the field of education. At the same time, it was supposed to mobilize the technical and financial resources to make progress in the EFA goals possible. The FTI, however, is neither led nor developed by UNESCO, but by the WB. The WB not only launched the initiative –in collaboration with other donors- but also hosts the FTI Secretariat and serves as the trustee and supervising entity for two trust funds related to the FTI: the Catalytic Fund (CF) –which provides financial assistance- and the Education Program Development Fund (EDDF) – which provides technical support and fosters knowledge generation and sharing across countries. In this context, the WB has not only managed to raise its international profile but also to increase its control over the EFA movement and its influence in the developing countries involved in this process. Moreover, in the first steps of the FTI, having an approved PRSP was one of the conditions for a country to participate in the Initiative¹².

The FTI Initiative works as follows: all low-income countries which

¹² Recent discussions on the FTI are demanding a more flexible approach to the eligibility criteria. According to this, it seems that it is not necessary to have a full PRSP but only a “credible interim PRSP” or a similar strategy to reduce poverty (ActionAid, 2003).

demonstrate a “serious commitment” to achieving universal primary education can receive technical or financial support from the FTI. The conditions for a country to be eligible in the initiative are, among others, to have an approved PRSP, to agree to the sectoral program for education with bilateral and multilateral donors and to accept the benchmarks and indicators set to monitor the process (World Bank, 2004: 5). The FTI process also includes a set of measures prior to the approval of countries’ participation. Of special interest among these measures are those directed at increasing the low-income countries’ “capacity” to develop the educational component of their PRSPs or those addressed at reviewing their national education sector plans. Formally speaking, these measures aim to create the conditions for countries to participate in the Initiative.

All in all, it can be concluded that the provision of support under the FTI Initiative is clearly conditioned to the application of a set of measures that far from demonstrating a commitment to education, demonstrate a commitment to the WB’s criteria. The need for an approved PRSP or the need to agree to the national educational program with bilateral and multilateral donors are clear examples of that.

5. Conclusion

This article has intended to analyse the role of the PRSPs in the development policies’ arena and specifically in the definition of a “pragmatic” link between education policies and poverty reduction. In order to conclude the analysis, we will stress three main issues: some of the limitations of the PRSPs for overcoming the “short policy menu” of the previous decades; their role in consolidating the hegemonic role of the WB in the global agenda for development; and some of the main challenges these strategies present.

First, as shown in the first sections of the paper, the PRSPs introduce few new aspects to the analysis of the relation between economic growth, poverty and education. In fact, although a broad explanation and description of poverty is provided, and more social elements are introduced, the rationale followed by the promoters of this initiative is basically the same as that which they supported in the 80s and 90s. This continuity is shown by such a hierarchy of priorities that still subordinates the social aspects of development to the macroeconomic and governability recommendations. As Craig and Porter have argued when they conceptualise the *inclusive liberalism*, “this is reiterating: global economic integration first, good governance second, poverty reduction following as a result, underpinned by limited safety nets and human capital development” (Craig

and Porter, 2003: 54). The approach of Álvarez Leguizamón (2008) also allows to underline the links between this rationale and the *modernity* approaches to developing countries' performance. According to this view, the individual (or national) characteristics are used as the basis for the explanations of poverty and, thus, for the solutions proposed, and the focus is neither put on unequal national or international power relations (Fine et al., 2001), nor on class relations or (non) redistributive strategies (Øyen, 2000). Moreover, the technical approach at the expense of the political one helps to conceal broader discussions about what poverty reduction should be in political and social terms rather than in economical ones (Cimadamore, 2008, Nustad, 2000).

Secondly, many authors have analysed the increasing importance and influence of the WB in the configuration of the global development agenda (i.e. Therien, 1999-2005, Noël, 2006, Álvarez Leguizamón, 2008). This influence, as demonstrated in the process of subordination of the UNESCO to the WB, is particularly strong in the field of education, where the Bank is the major international donor. Moreover, as the title of the paper suggests, the WB is playing –thought the PRSPs- a key role in defining the hegemonic link between education and poverty. So, how is this hegemony constructed?

As we have seen throughout the text, the WB has been able to incorporate traditional “opponents” in the political orientation of its measures (like the UN and specifically UNESCO) and to adopt some of the discursive aspects from the 'intellectual' opposition (Alú et al., 2006: 76), thus, showing a great ability to adapt its own discourses and practices to a given socioeconomic and political context. So, according to our analysis, there are two main elements characterising this construction of hegemony:

On the one hand, the Bank is able to change some aspects of its communication strategy without changing the political orientation of its practices, that is, without renouncing to its main aim: economic growth, and the liberalisation of international trade. An example of this ability can be observed in the introduction of non-monetary dimensions in the definition of poverty or in the new emphasis on equity that some of the WB's proposals on education show. In spite of these discursive changes, it is difficult to see to which extent these modifications are reflected in specific policies substantially different from those promoted in previous decades.

On the other hand, the logic of harmonisation between donors, stimulated both from international and supranational organisations, seems to be spreading some kind of

'common sense' regarding the way development policies are to be adopted. This common sense is reinforced by a consensus umbrella in which these policies are presented in such a way that the only discussion seems to be a technical one. The question, in this context, is on how we will do that but not on what must we do and why. The “depoliticisation” of this issue makes easier its spreading among the different actors as if the whole process were, undoubtedly, in favour of the general interest and as if discussing its foundations were defending only its particular interests. The use of particular interests (in this case the PRSPs promoters interests) like general interests is another of the characteristics of the hegemonic movements as it has been defined by Jessop (2008).

Finally, we would like to highlight one of the main challenging questions that the PRSPs present. This challenge is, in our view, related to conditionality and to the expected change from conditions to contracts embedded in the PRSPs. In fact, the PRSPs have underlined their impact on the results and performance despite influencing the conditions of the process. That means, theoretically the only “exigency” to receive funding is related to achieve specific and measurable results in the field of poverty reduction, while the processes through which these results can be achieved are left to the national willingness. According to the WB this entails a sort of contract between donors and developing countries in which there is an agreement to exchange money and assistance for results.

Of course, this introduces a significant change, at least in appearance, in relation to the sort of conditions (more focused on processes) characteristic of the Structural Adjustments Plans (SAPs). The change is visible in the strong emphasis the PRSPs put on the national ownership and the participatory processes, but it is difficult to understand how these new contracts can guarantee this governmental and civil participation in the elaboration of the strategies. On the contrary, the stages through which the countries have to pass in order to have the WB's Board approval for their PRSPs, suggest that the change is not so broad as it seems. Looking just on the first of these stages (or conditions), which is having a positive report by the IMF on its macroeconomic structure, we can see whether the conditionalities still exist or not. If the evaluation is negative, they will need to improve their economic performance by modifying some of its structural elements, and then the proposals are quite similar to those characteristic on the 80s and 90s: trade liberalisation, increase of the private inversion, decentralisation, privatisation, and so on.

Moreover, considering the role of the PRSPs in the access to other sources of international funding, it is necessary to remark that they act as filters for the concession of aid linked to initiatives like the FTI or some items of the European Commission budget support. Therefore, we can conclude that the PRSPs not only involve some conditions that developing countries must meet but they are also a condition itself for developing countries to have access to other international resources.

Acknowledgments

This paper has been produced as part of the research project “Advancements and shortcomings of Education for All: the politics of the educational agenda, the trend of educational inequalities and the quality of democracy in Latin America”. The project has been funded by Spain’s Ministry of Science and Technology, with reference number EDU2008-00816.

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