

Universal Education and Good Governance: Exploring the links

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A Dynamic Relationship

Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) has historically focused on “good performers.” With evidence that aid works better in countries with stronger institutions and more effective policy regimes, good governance was a prerequisite for investment. The assumption has been: good governance first, education later. Good governance was thought to be a prerequisite to building the conditions for strengthening education.

The realization that countries furthest from Education for All (EFA) goals and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are settings of fragility has forced donors to step away from the logic of this assumption. Can investment in education instead strengthen governance? Current patterns of investment in education suggest a belief in this pathway. The number of fragile states funded by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), for example, grew exponentially, from 1 in 2003 (when it was the Fast Track Initiative) to 22 in 2013.

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Is there evidence to support that education can lead to good governance? We find unmistakable relationships between universal education and good governance. The direction and strength of these relationships, however, remain murky. Does good governance lead to universal education? Does universal education lead to good governance? Based on our review of the literature and exploratory analyses, the answer is likely, in both cases, yes. When we examine correlations between education indicators in 1995 and governance indicators in 2012, we find that they are statistically significant. They are also stronger than statistically significant correlations between governance indicators in 1996 and education indicators in 2011. The direction of causality is still uncertain, but we do show a stronger relationship between high levels of education at an early time and good governance at a later time than vice versa.

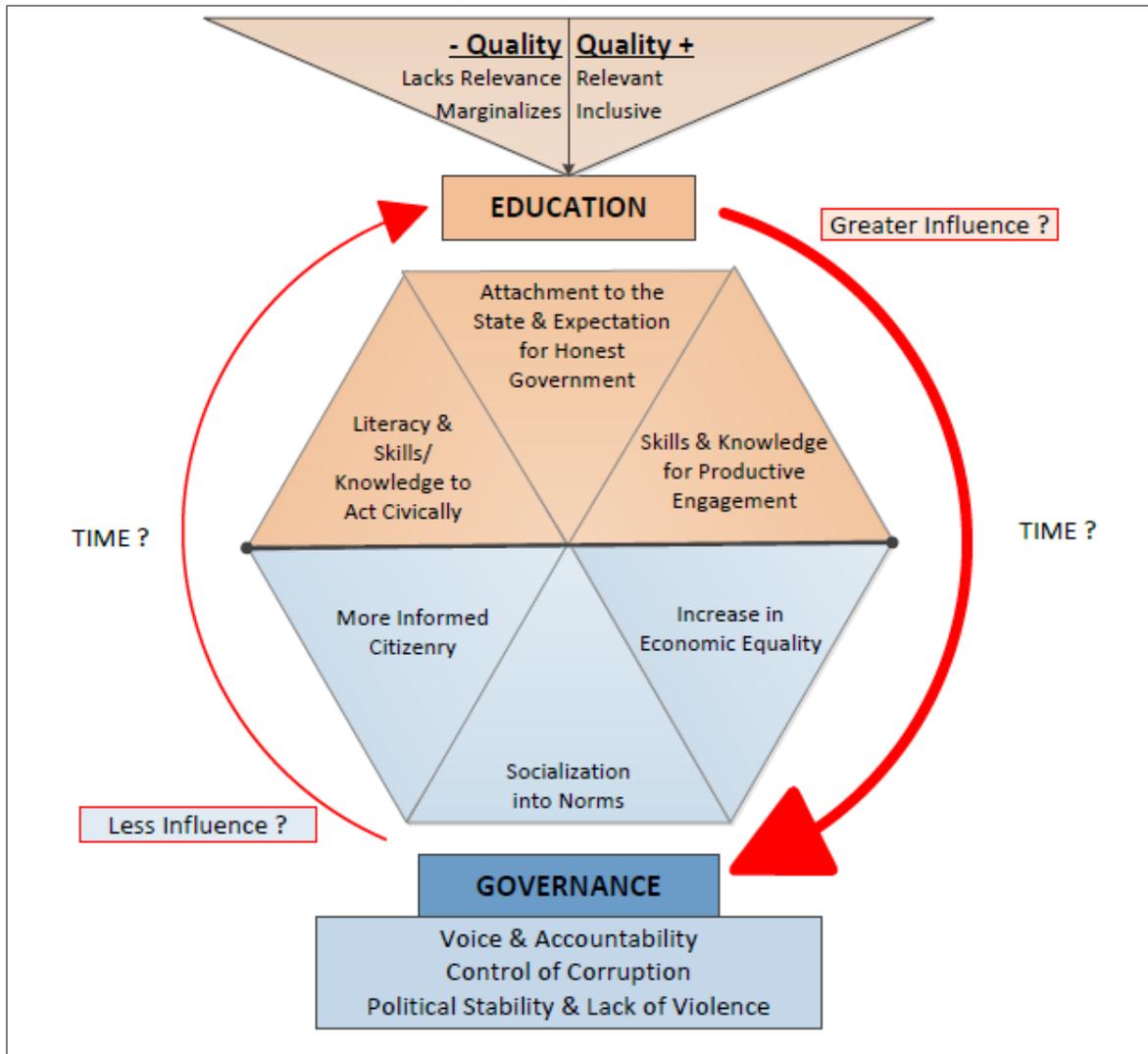
It appears that there are multiple relationships between universal education and good governance, and that they may be cyclical and mutually reinforcing. Of particular interest are the characteristics of education systems and the content of education, which may mediate the effects of universal education on governance (See Figure 1).

Not all universal education is created equal. What are the content and structures of education that are most likely to produce pathways to good governance?

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Figure 1: Education and Governance: A Dynamic Cycle



Mechanisms

Overall, we see the potential of universal education to act on three elements of governance: voice and accountability, control of corruption, and political instability and violence. Across these domains, there are three key mechanisms by which universal education might promote good governance:

1. *The development of a more informed citizenry.*

Education can be essential for citizens to access and act on information. The ability to access information relates not only to literacy rates; it also relates to other school-acquired knowledge required to comprehend and analyze information and to act civically. For example, math skills allow citizens to understand if their schools are being cheated out of funds and general knowledge of a political system enables citizens to understand how best to influence it.

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2. The socialization into norms, including attachment to the state.

Education socializes citizens. It can do so in ways that lead both towards and away from good governance. It can lead to greater attachment to the nation state. This greater attachment brings with it greater expectations for honest government, which is associated with increased state capacity, or strong institutions. These strong institutions are less likely to exhibit corruption (and they also feed back into strengthening education). On the other hand, the content of education can serve to distance citizens from the nation state: curriculum can reveal explicit or subtle discrimination toward particular ethnic, religious, or political groups and can increase social distance between diverse groups, while rationalizing or reproducing intergroup grievances. In this way, education can build greater mistrust within government institutions thereby perpetuating weak governance.

#2: Education can socialize citizens towards or away from good governance.

3. Increases in economic equality.

Education can lead to greater economic equality. Greater economic equality leads back into more demand for education, which in turn leads to stronger demands on the state by more citizens and decreased elite power, resulting in lowered corruption. Unequal access to education or lack of access to quality education, however, does not increase economic equality.

Across all three mechanisms, the nature of both the structure of education systems and content of teaching and learning are critical. In particular, education that is inclusive and relevant may have positive effects on governance, while education that alienates or marginalizes individuals and groups or that lacks relevance to the aspirations and possible livelihoods of students may have negative effects on governance. For example, the content and skills about which a citizenry is “informed” through education determine whether and how individuals have voice, seek accountability, and counter corruption. Similarly, the inclusivity and relevance of the norms into which citizens are socialized appear to form a dividing line between strong and weak governance. Further, increases in economic equality by definition reflect inclusion so that all citizens can have voice, seek accountability, counter corruption, and work to support rule of law and against political instability and violence.

#3: Education can lead to greater economic equality if it is equitable and of high quality.

Next Steps

We used enrollment and primary survival rate as proxies for the extent to which education is universal.

Net primary enrolment measures the number of children enrolled in a primary school as a percentage of the eligible age group; it is the official indicator for MDG 2, to achieve “universal primary enrollment” by 2015.

Primary survival rate refers to the share of children enrolled in the first grade of primary school who continue in school and reach the last grade of primary school. This measure is critical, as in many countries a far larger number of children begin school than persist in school. Globally, only 75% of the children who start school complete primary school; in sub-Saharan Africa, only 56% complete and only 23% of poor girls (UNESCO, 2014, p. 9).

Governance is “the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised for the common good” (World Bank, 2011a). Following the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators, we examine six elements of governance: voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, control of corruption.

These three mechanisms emerge as possible guides to think about how to invest in education systems that promote good governance. Yet, further study is needed to continue to disentangle the relationships between education and governance and to reach more solid conclusions about the ways in which these and other mechanisms are involved.

One essential dimension is time. How long would it take to see any positive effects of education on governance? In our exploratory analyses, we are able to see only a 16-year span, barely longer than one cycle of education and likely not enough time for a more informed citizenry to be active in shaping institutions or for livelihoods to expand in such a way that economic equality could take root, for example. The growing field of “institutional legacies” suggests that the effects of education on governance would be longer-term than we examine here. Studies that combine in-depth historical and qualitative case studies with longitudinal analysis of statistical data will be essential in further establishing whether and how universal education might lead to good governance, and the ways in which the relationship may be cyclical.

A second essential dimension is the quality of education. Overall, in our exploratory analyses, we see stronger correlations between governance indicators and education indicators in the mid-1990s than we do now.³ An important difference between these two times periods may be the quality of universal education. There is clear evidence that remarkable progress in increasing access to education since 2000 has often happened at the expense of quality. Indeed, not all universal education is created equal. Does the weaker correlation between universal education and good governance more recently reflect tangible differences in the quality of education? A research agenda going forward should be focused on determining the content and structures of education that are most likely to produce pathways to good governance.

³ Part of this trend may be methodological: in the later time periods, there is less variability in net primary enrollment and primary survival, as universal education becomes a reality, or closer to a reality, in many countries.