



# Global Educational Expansion and Socio-Economic Development: An Assessment of Findings from the Social Sciences

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**Summary.** — Among development agencies, conventional wisdom holds that educational expansion improves economic welfare and health, reduces inequalities, and encourages democratic political systems. We investigate the empirical foundations for these expectations in recent social science research. Consistent evidence indicates that health and demographic benefits result from educational expansion, and suggests that education enhances, but does not ensure, individuals' economic security. However, the impact of educational expansion on growth remains debated, and decades of sociological studies offer evidence that educational expansion does not necessarily narrow social inequalities. Finally, considerable controversy surrounds the implications of educational expansion for democratization. Reasonable forecasts of the consequences of further educational expansions need to consider the diverse social contexts in which these expansions will occur.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Among development agencies, conventional wisdom holds that educational expansion facilitates numerous favorable changes for countries and individuals. Improved economic welfare and health, reduced inequalities, and more democratic political systems are just some of the purported benefits invoked in pleas for the expansion of education throughout the world. A recent World Bank document on the Education for All initiative provides a characteristic example:

[G]lobal research ... has established unequivocally that education increases individual incomes; that it is positively correlated with macroeconomic growth; that it is strongly correlated with reductions in poverty, illiteracy and income inequality; and that it has strong complementary effects on the achievement

of ... lower infant and child mortality, better nutrition, and the construction of democratic societies. The expansion of educational opportunity, which can simultaneously promote income equality and growth, is a "win win" strategy that in most societies is far easier to implement than the redistribution of other assets, such as land or capital. In short, education is one of the most powerful instruments known for reducing poverty and inequality and for laying the basis for sustained economic growth, sound governance, and effective institutions. (2002a, p. v)

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Similar rationales for investments in education are readily found in other documents produced by the World Bank, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and other international organizations supporting greater access to education worldwide (see UNESCO, 2002; UNICEF, 1995; World Bank, 1999, 2002b).

Just how strong is the empirical foundation for statements, such as the one above, that portray education as the panacea for a wide range of social ills? To address this question, we assess the evidence on five related assumptions about the consequences of educational expansion for socioeconomic development:

- (a) Human capital stock is central to national economic development, as better-educated citizens are more productive.
- (b) Within societies, the expansion of educational opportunities enables individuals to improve their economic circumstances.
- (c) Educational expansion narrows social inequalities within countries by promoting a meritocratic basis for status attainment in which the talented can achieve appropriate positions in the economy, regardless of social background.
- (d) Countries with better-educated citizens have healthier, slower-growing populations, as educated individuals make better health choices, live longer, and have healthier and fewer children.
- (e) Countries with more educated populations are more democratic, as their citizens are able to make more informed political decisions.

We investigate these statements by drawing on evidence from empirical studies in sociology, demography, economics, political science, and anthropology.<sup>1</sup> Prior reviews of the impact of education have tended to focus on research in a single discipline; in contrast, this paper synthesizes available evidence for a range of outcomes and across the social sciences with the goal of accumulating knowledge from diverse disciplines and promoting interdisciplinary research on the implications of global educational expansion. We also illustrate certain points made in the literature with empirical evidence about links between education and economic, health, demographic, and political outcomes. Note that the term education can refer to a wide range of formal and informal learning programs and processes; for the purposes of this paper, we follow the general con-

vention in development organization documents and use the term to refer to formal schooling.

Our comprehensive assessment of empirical research on the consequences of educational expansion is revealing on several fronts. We find consistent evidence from a range of disciplines for the beneficial effects of educational expansion in the realms of health and demographic change. There is less consensus regarding the effects of educational expansion for economic growth, the erosion of social inequalities, or democratization. Finally, we identify four plausible reasons for inconclusive or ambiguous findings in these domains. These insights should serve to advance future research on the consequences of global educational expansion.

## 2. EDUCATION AND NATIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

*Human capital stock is central to national economic development, as better-educated citizens are more productive.*

On the one hand, there is an obvious coincidence of educational expansion and national economic development: Developed countries tend to have more educated populations than less-developed countries. Figure 1 presents an illustration of the relationship, plotting primary, secondary, and tertiary gross enrollment ratios against the gross national product (GNP) per capita for 102 countries with complete data in 1995. Data points for individual countries and trend lines for each level of education are included. Figure 1 demonstrates that countries with higher per capita GNPs have higher ratios of educational enrollment, especially at levels beyond primary school.<sup>2</sup> More rigorous evidence supporting the link between human capital stock and growth can be found in Barro's (1991) study showing a positive relationship between initial enrollment rates and economic growth in 98 countries. Most recently, in a synthesis of the empirical growth literature, Petrakis and Stamakis (2002) similarly concluded that economies with a larger stock of human capital experience faster growth.

Also supporting the beneficial consequences of educational expansion for growth is research on the impact of government investments in education. Poot's (2000) synthesis of research

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