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Elites, Incrementalism and Educational Policy-making in Post-independence Zambia

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INTRODUCTION

Background

The growing gap between the rhetoric of educational reform and the propensity of educational institutions to stay the course or veer in some unexpected direction in many developing countries demands an understanding of some major factors influencing educational policy-making. Many evaluations of educational reforms and experiments in these countries have tended to focus on the technical side of the enterprise, namely on issues of design, resource and other environmental constraints on the implementation process, to the marginalisation of group influence and method of policy-making. There are other subtle but equally important concerns which are of interest to the student of comparative education, namely the questions of who makes or influences educational policy, and *how* such a policy is made have an equally important bearing on the fate of educational reforms. Studies alluding to these concerns have not been entirely lacking. O'Brien [1], for example, has examined the role played by élite groups in the recent Educational Reform debates in Zambia [2] but his approach is hyper-factual, with an over-concern for factual narrative without theoretical underpinning or significance. The inclusion in this discussion of élite and incremental models of policy-making is intended to address this deficiency.

For the purpose of an orderly discussion, the paper is prefaced by a review of élite and incremental models of policy-making, and then proceeds to outline three major educational policy efforts in 1966, 1976–77 and 1979–82 aimed at reforming the national educational system, and examine realities of policy-making against the two models. The choice of Zambia is interesting in that it is one of the few ex-British colonies in Africa to make a serious attempt to break with several British educational conventions, but without much success. The 1976–77 Educational Reform proposals, for example, were the only occasion in Commonwealth Africa to attempt to enlist wide popular participation in educational policy-making in the post-independence era. The Reform proposals were so well advertised both in and outside the country that one author was enticed to compare them with those undertaken in the Netherlands [3], while others gave extensive comments in international journals [4,5], and at international conferences [6].

Elite and incremental models of policy-making

Although educational policies in developing countries are supposedly intended to benefit the masses, and are meant to be implemented in a radical manner, the real beneficiaries and influential elements are often members of élite groups whose conservative orientation dictates a gradualist approach to educational reform and implementation. This observation suggests that élite and incremental models of policy-making are particularly relevant to the understanding of some general causes and consequences of educational policy-making in developing countries. According to Dye & Zeigler the élite model of policy-making assumes, among other things, that public policies are outcomes of the preferences and values of the élite [7]. In another discussion Dye observes thus about the élite model:

> Public policy does not reflect demands of masses but rather the prevailing values of the élite. Changes in public policy will be incremental rather than revolutionary. Active élites are subject to relatively little direct influence from apathetic masses. Elites influence masses more than masses influence élites. [8]

The overriding influence of élites on policy matters does not in itself suggest that they are a homogeneous group or that they enjoy consensus on all policy issues, but they are fundamentally agreed on the basic norms of the system and on the continuation of the system itself 'only policy alternatives that fall within the shared consensus will be given serious consideration [9].' Dye does not elaborate on the incremental method he refers to, and consequently fails to explain why élites tend to be conservative in the first place.

This task is adequately undertaken by Lindblom in his article, 'The science of muddling through' [10], though he does not relate it to the élite model. Lindblom refuted the observations of some theorists who argued that decisions or policies were made in a thoroughly comprehensive, systematic and rational manner [11]. Instead he argued that policy changes are generally incremental modifications to past programmes. Incrementalism is conservative in that it is primarily concerned with minor changes in existing policies.

This conservatism has several sources: first, policy-makers easily accept the legitimacy of established programmes because they have no sufficient information, resources, time, or intelligence required to man new policy programmes. Secondly, they are more comfortable with previous policy programmes than the consequences of new ones, especially in uncertain conditions. Thirdly, existing policies may have heavy investments—buildings, emotions, and personnel—and only those changes that will cause little dislocation to existing arrangements can be seriously considered. Fourthly, incrementalism is practically suitable, because it renders agreement among policy-makers easier since it reduces conflict by resorting to minor changes. Conflict is usually heightened when proposed changes involve major policy shifts. These and other considerations make incrementalism more appealing to policy-makers than radical or comprehensive approaches to policy-making.

What is not made clear in the above outline of élite and incremental models is that although the two could easily coincide in reality, they are not necessarily causally linked. Elites need not be conservative as Dye seems to suggest, nor is incrementalism a unique policy strategy of élite groups. However, the case of Zambian educational policy seems to fit well into these two models. Not only have élite groups dominated the educational policy deliberations, but they have also preferred incremental changes to the radical suggestions made by the government. The remainder of this discussion is centred on this assumption.

A word or two about the use of the term élite will be in order. It is used here to refer to the numerically small but politically powerful and socially privileged groups which include Zambian and expatriate businessmen, bureaucrats, leading politicians, members of learned professions, church and trade union leaders [12]. These groups do not necessarily share consensual views on the Zambian educational system, but they have taken a common conservative stand on almost all educational issues since independence in 1964 [13].

ELITE IMPACT ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY

The context of Zambian educational policy

At the time of independence in October 1964, Zambia inherited an exceptionally weak educational profile. According to O'Brien "Zambia had fewer skilled and educated citizens than virtually any other ex-colony" [14]. In 1963 there were about 100 university graduates and under 1,000 secondary school graduates. With her sophisticated copper industry Zambia had a great need for skilled personnel. In addition to the shortage of manpower, there was also a general problem which usually accompanies big political changes like independence, namely the desire on the part of the government to do something different from the previous regime. In this case the government embraced the tenets of the welfare state and quickly introduced a free public school system. In the predominantly illiterate society that Zambia was in the sixties, education was among the most prized social services, especially because it was directly related to upward social mobility, and demand for it was predictably high.

Against this background stood an educational system that was woefully inadequate to meet the challenges of the post-colonial society. All but a few schools were run by Christian missionaries whose modest budgets could not allow large enrolments. There were few trade schools, and no university institution. Moreover, the school system in existence then was closely patterned after the British grammar school, when in fact, the greater need was for comprehensive schools. A more vexing feature of the Zambian educational system at independence was segregation of students according to race. Children of white settlers had the best schools, usually located in urban areas; then came the children of Asian settlers and Euro-Africans ('coloureds') who were grouped together, and finally came the schools for African children. This arrangement was a reflection of the colonial political economy in which racial segregation was a feature of almost all aspects of life.

These problems pointed towards radical rather than incremental policy shifts in the educational sector. The new African leadership was faced with no alternative but to embark upon drastic measures in educational policy. However, measure after measure, it became apparent that the method preferred was less radical than the rhetoric sounded, and that there were vested interests in the colonial educational system that could not be easily swayed even after two decades of political independence.

The Education Act of 1966

The first major attempt at reforming the Zambian educational system was undertaken in 1966 to address the most obvious anomalies in the educational sector. Among other things the Act empowered the government to abolish racial segregation in schools, introduce non-fee-paying school registration in mission-controlled and public schools, 'nationalise' mission schools, and abolish the sixth form or Advanced level certificate programmes, thereby enabling ordinary level school certificate holders to enter the newly established University of Zambia [15].

These measures brought about several changes. One obvious consequence was the rapid expansion of the public school system. By the end of the 1960s each of the 50 districts had a secondary school, as opposed to the five government institutions that had existed in the entire country in 1964. Mission schools now became 'aided schools' with the government meeting student tuition and boarding fees, and teachers' salaries. There was a correspondingly sharp decline in the number of private schools, a trend that reflected the state of the new political economy in which state corporations or parastatal companies constituted about 80% of the national economy while marginalising the role of the private sector [16]. Remarkable expansion in school enrolments took place within the next decade: primary school enrolments rose from 378,000 in 1964 to 810,000 in 1973; secondary enrolments from 13,850 to 65,750 during the same period. Technical and vocational training colleges enrolled about 3,000 in 1973, as opposed to zero in 1964. The University of Zambia's enrolments grew from 312 in 1966 to 3,000 in 1973 [17].

These changes, 'revolutionary' as the national leaders construed them, were basically incremental rather than radical. Quantitative expansion of the educational system was not accompanied by any significant transformation in its structure and content. Between 1966 and 1976 the curriculum in schools and colleges had incorporated very few modifications to suit the Zambian environment. The system retained its grammar school features, and students wrote the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate examinations set and marked in England. The abolition of the sixth form was not without compromise: the University was to admit students to its first year programmes of study based on five acceptable Ordinary Level passes, but its degree programmes were to take a year or two longer than similar programmes in British universities [18].

Even the widely acclaimed 'nationalisation' of mission schools was not a complete take-over by the government. In the 1960s an overwhelming majority of primary and secondary schools were still in the hands of the missionaries. What the Act did was to label these schools 'grant-aided' schools, meaning that although the government financed the schools, management was still in the hands of respective missionary agencies. Admission to these schools was no longer based on religious denomination, but once admitted students were required to observe religious practices of the controlling denomination. In Catholic schools, for example, Protestant students were required to attend the compulsory Sunday mass alongside their Catholic colleagues. The same was true of other denominational schools. Some missionaries surrendered their schools to the government, but this was done voluntarily by the mission agencies concerned rather than through compliance with nationalisation.

Another compromise was the inclusion in the Act of the provision for private schools. The idea of doing away entirely with private schools to match Zambia's declared socialist objectives met with formidable opposition both in and outside the government. Here again the educational system had some parallels with industry where the government failed to nationalise all major corporations, or where it had partial control like the copper-mining companies.

This gradualist, cautious approach to the implementation of the 1966 Act was dictated by several considerations raised by élite groups. One consideration was the preoccupation of élite groups with the maintenance of educational standards on a par with British institutions. Several élite groups were unhappy with the abolition of the sixth form, a move they construed as calculated to lower educational standards at the university. Mwanakatwe observes thus:

> Critics of the University regarding wastage claim that the academic performance of students will remain poor until government decides to reintroduce Sixth Form classes in secondary schools. These critics, a small but articulate and vociferous minority, prefer a three-year first degree course for undergraduates who complete the 'A' levels successfully in the Cambridge Higher school certificate Examinations for Overseas Students. [19]

This concern for standards led to the rejection of the proposal to localise school-leaving certificate examinations. There was fear of debasing standards if localisation of examinations was introduced.

Similarly, the government's concession to partial control of mission schools was largely determined by the sentiments of élite groups—especially businessmen, top civil servants, church leaders, and others who graduated from mission schools. Admittedly, the history of a missionary role in providing education for Africans was considerably long, and over the years a system of partnership between the government and mission agencies had emerged. Some radical politicians called for total nationalisation or state take-over of all schools, but this policy was bound to antagonise mission agencies and their supporters. The government met and discussed the issue with several interested parties, and the pro-missionary view won the day. Nothing bears a more eloquent testimony to government's concession for a gradual take-over than the statement of the Minister of Education.

> The problem of management of schools has been a live issue this year. I must emphasise that voluntary (mission) agencies will not be compelled to surrender management of primary schools. Nevertheless, it is government policy to assume responsibility for the management of primary schools when voluntary agencies express a willingness to transfer them to the local authorities. In connection with post-primary work, it is my hope that voluntary agencies will come forward and participate as far as possible in the future expansion. [20]

The 1976–77 educational reform proposals

The 1966 Act had increased access to education, but it also helped to create a system that was a decade later viewed by policy-makers as a very problematic one. By 1975 only 20% of primary school graduates found places in junior secondary school, and about half that percentage proceeded to senior secondary. Less than 5% of school certificate holders entered the university, and about 20% went to colleges. A few were absorbed in employment; but the majority joined the teeming jobless school leavers. Coincidentally Zambia was badly hit by an economic slump in 1976 and her revenue from copper, the economy's mainstay, was almost zero in that year. Stern measures followed: the Kwacha, the country's currency, was devalued by 20%. The economy's capacity to both support the school system and employ its graduates was greatly impaired.

Naturally, this led to critical review of the educational system, especially its structure and the curriculum. General complaints ranged from charges of irrelevant curriculum to the élitist bias in the educational system. To gauge public opinion and encourage popular participation in policy-making the government drafted proposals in the form of a document titled: *Education for Development* [21]. Both oral and written responses were solicited.

The proposals had made several far-reaching suggestions for the new Zambian educational system. The reformers, influenced by developments in Cuban and Maoist Chinese education [22] sought to recommend an educational system that would fit the political ideology of Zambia—Humanism—a form of African socialism [23]. Among the most important proposals were: the proposal for establishing work and education programmes whereby students would alternate their time between work and academic learning; the proposal to increase the years of universal primary education from 7 to 10 years (that is all eligible children would attend school from grades 1 to 10, leaving grades 11 and 12 to those who would qualify); the establishment of a 24-months compulsory military service for all students; the replacement of the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate by a local examination; the introduction of political education, especially scientific socialism, and abandoning religious education and certain public holidays like Christmas Day, Boxing Day; and resorting to using churches as classrooms. 42,000 copies of *Education for Development* were distributed throughout the country, and formal debates opened in May and ended in November 1976.

Both the participation in and the outcome of the debates clearly affirmed the dominant role of élites and their preference for incremental rather than radical reform in educational policy. Both the nature and context of the debates favoured élite groups. The 42,000 copies were circulated among literate participants, especially institutional leaders like headmasters, principals, executive committees of parent-teacher associations, farmers' associations, labour leaders and the church leaders. The document was written in English, a language (though official) that is neither spoken nor understood by the majority of Zambians. An unspecified number of the summaries of the document were published in seven local languages, but this could not increase mass participation in the debates because of the high levels of illiteracy in the country (about 70% of the population is illiterate).

The existing media infrastructure also favoured the better educated and wealthier members, especially in urban areas. Television debates were watched by very few viewers, since a tiny number of Zambians can afford to buy television sets. The radio was also extensively used, and while it is widely used in rural areas, there was at the time an acute shortage of radio cells in the country. Newspapers also reported debates deliberations, and gave critical comments and invited written opinions on the reforms; but like television, the press is also an urban phenomenon. The two national daily papers—*Times of Zambia* and *Zambia Daily Mail*—are published in English and their circulation is largely confined to urban areas.

However, even without media bottlenecks, the participation of the poor and illiterate members of the society would still be problematic. Participation in decision-making in modern institutions requires a set of skills like literacy, organisational ability, and bargaining strategies. These elements exist to a very low degree among the poor, especially the peasantry in the countryside. In addition, although the poor are interested in sending their children to school, it is questionable whether they would be keenly involved in the debates on technical niceties of the curriculum. For the most part they lacked information regarding the issues raised in the reform proposals.

The reactions of the groups that participated generally tended to border on conservatism or near-rejection of the proposals. Business men, commercial farmers, trade union leaders, top civil servants and Christian clergymen were well represented. The opinions of these groups were almost unanimous in rejecting the proposal for alternating work and education, the introduction of compulsory 24-month military service, and the introduction of political education in the form of scientific socialism. Perhaps there is no better description of these groups' reaction to the Reform proposals than O'Brien's observation:

> Opposition to the work and study proposal came from those who believed that the present situation should change gradually and others who believed that the existing system was inadequate but the reforms were misguided. Some, such as the Zambia Seed Producers Association, believed that the system had proved itself over a long period in many countries and did not need change. This latter group had an interest in the existing system as they represented the commercial farmers, most of whom were expatriates. E. Chipimo, a former High Commissioner in London, and at the time local director of the Standard Bank, said the worthwhile ideas in the document had been or were current in the existing system or could be accommodated by it. Both Chanda and Chipimo asked if the authors seriously considered that their theories could be implemented. The same two in company with others said that . . . these reform proposals were the latest and most disastrous in the series. These might be said to represent the attitudes of the industrial and commercial sectors which were keen on improving the existing system but were not enthusiastic about any radical changes. [24]

In response to sentiments such as these the government drafted a revised edition of the proposals entitled: *Educational Reform: proposals and recommendations.* This document had little resemblance to its predecessor, *Education for Development,* which had drawn heavily on Maoist Chinese and Cuban models of education. *Educational Reform* underplayed the work-and-education proposal, was evasive about the compulsory 24-months military service (it was completely abandoned in 1982), and conveniently avoided the atheistic tone of scientific socialism. However, it did approve the localisation of school certificate examinations but recommended that this should be done cautiously.

The Zambian Examination Council was established to set and mark school certificate examinations. But between 1978 and 1982 the Examination Council was under intensive tutelage from England: 'the University of Cambridge Syndicate, the British Council, and the British Government agreed to assist and monitor the new examinations for a time, thus guaranteeing international acceptability' [25]. The first school certificates issued by the Examination Council bore both the University of Cambridge and the Zambia Examination Council emblems. It was only in 1983 that the council issued its own certificates.

Another compromise was the extension of universal primary education from 7 to 9 (instead of the previously suggested 10) years of basic education, and three years of senior secondary education. This was more a response to the crisis of access to schooling than a concern for the radical tone of the reform proposals. The issue of work-and-education was resolved by the introduction of production units in all schools. This was not a novel thing, for even during the colonial era schools had some farms or clubs dealing with the production of vegetables or poultry. Production units were nowhere near to alternating work and education as the proposals had initially suggested; the latter would have involved students spending half the academic year in various factories, industries and farms, and the other half in school. Thus, *Educational Reform* which was finally accepted by the government, was a gradualist approach to change, and in the words of O'Brien it represented:

> the interests of the emerging middle class and those who had an interest in retaining the status quo. It would also appear that the party, despite its rhetoric, recognised that Zambia's future lay with her industries and not with agriculture, in towns and not in the rural areas. The education system still aimed at the production of academically competent pupils who could compete on the international scene. The debate did demonstrate that... the people who were articulate and literate were the ones who were most likely to benefit. [26]

Scientific socialism 1978–82

The proposal to introduce scientific socialism or Marxist-Leninism as a form of political education was inadequately debated in 1976. The churches had opposed it, and somehow *Educational Reform* was evasive about it. For a while after 1977 it appeared as if the issue would be consigned to oblivion. However, in 1979 political leaders made constant reference to it. The government intended to give a Marxist orientation to its policies, and introduce scientific socialism in all Zambian educational institutions. This time, however, the churches' reaction was sharp. In 1979 an inter-denominational letter was written by Catholic bishops and Protestant leaders titled: ***Marxism, Humanism and Christianity,*** and was circulated to the laity thoughout the country. The churches began by accepting the tenets of Humanism, Zambia's official ideology, but categorically rejected scientific socialism:

> Our first main reason for rejecting scientific socialism is that as a philosophy it denies God. Our second is that this rejection of God necessarily leads to a rejection of man. We differ profoundly from Marxists in our understanding of the human person, so that Marxist Humanism is also radically different from Christian Humanism. [27]

The controversy raged on between 1979 and 1982 when President Kaunda invited church leaders to a seminar on Humanism and Development and tried to assure them thus:

> Scientific socialism will be taught in all schools in future as part of political education... It will not replace religious education, and the Party had no intention of

> interfering with the freedom of religious organisations and freedom of worship, which are guaranteed in the constitution. [28]

The church leaders were not persuaded by this explanation and replied that:

> The Party claims that believers in the Marxist/Leninist brand of communism are allies of those who believe in Humanism. We do not accept believers in Marxist/Leninist branch of communism as our allies, because of their treatment of Christians. While this does not mean that UNIP will automatically follow the example of the Marxist parties, it is not foolish of the church to worry that this might become true in some future time. [29]

Alarmed by the churches' stand, President Kaunda banned open discussion on the subject. Nonetheless, the government silently abandoned the idea of introducing scientific socialism in schools.

The churches' stand could be partly explained by their historical role in providing education for Africans in the colonial era. This role was reduced in the post-independence era, but it was still significant. The proposal that scientific socialism be introduced in schools challenged the churches' interests. The churches were joined by élite groups already discussed above, whose members were graduates of mission schools and practising members of Christian churches. President Kaunda is himself a practising Christian and many members of his government are regular church-goers; they joined the opposing views of influential businessmen like Chipimo in condemning scientific socialism. Draisma states that:

> the criticism voiced by sections of the clergy and professing Christians is, to a large extent, influenced by their position in society (centre-group membership) rather than by the radical social teachings of the Bible. In reality, large sections of the Zambian churches have adopted a western, class-based interpretation of gospel. Hence their accomodating attitude to capitalist development and educational models, and their unsophisticated rejection of any kind of socialism in which the contribution by Karl Marx is acknowledged. The association with western and Zambian centre-group interests weakens the strength of the ideological reservations expreseed by many leaders and members of the churches. [30]

The 'centre-group' consists of well-to-do people and are identical to élite groups identified earlier in this discussion. Even among government officials only a small but vocal minority seriously advocated the introduction of scientific socialism in Zambian schools; many leaders did not even understand what the phrase stood for!

CONCLUSION

This discussion has examined the role of élite groups in Zambian educational policy-making in the post-independence era, and three major attempts to reform the educational system have been used as illustrations. It is readily apparent from the discussion that élites or the well-to-do sections of the Zambian society have the upper hand in the formulation of educational policy. Evident, too, is the preference for gradual reform strategies rather than the officially declared 'radical' changes. In these respects the educational system resembles the national political economy. Since independence the government has announced several socialist measures in the economy but the result has always been moderate state control of companies in partnership with multinational corporations. Instead of creating a socialist economy, the government has ended up with a capitalist welfare state, and even this is now showing signs of strain and is reverting to its pre-welfare position. The education system could hardly be different.

However, the basic question revolves around the issue of why élites have been able to play a leading role in educational policy-making, and their preference for incremental change. One factor, not discussed in the essay, is that the political system, despite its socialist rhetoric, has embraced tenets of liberal democracy. Even after introducing the one-party state in 1973, the political system still operated on the precepts of liberal democracy, allowing group activity to influence public policy. In most African countries where military regimes have been established or where leaders have resorted to the introduction of Marxist governments (like Angola and Mozambique) group activity is highly circumscribed, and public policies (including educational policy) are the sole responsibility of the leadership or the party. The Zambian case, therefore, should be regarded as an exception rather than a rule. No élite group in contemporary Africa can deter a determined government from introducing measures it wishes to implement, except, of course, where a fairly liberal political atmosphere exists.

Given a liberal political atmosphere, incrementalism inevitably flourishes. Influential Zambian groups greatly value the educational standards that British colonialism bequeathed to the country. Additionally, the uncertainties that educational reforms would create, coupled with inadequate financial and personnel resources to implement reform provisions, dictated a gradualist, cautious approach to educational policy changes.

More research is required to shed light on the issues of *who* makes educational policy, and *how* educational policies are made in developing countries of Africa. The Zambian evidence is too limited to warrant generalisations for the continent, but it does indicate that in underdeveloped and predominantly illiterate societies élite groups, if given the chance, will dominate educational policy-making to preserve their interests.

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