

There is little doubt about the link between education and economic prosperity. Even in developed countries such as the U.S., the importance of a well-educated workforce is often cited as among the most critical long-term issues facing the nation – particularly when it comes to remaining competitive with other rapidly rising world powers (China, India for example) in a newly globalized economy. But for less developed countries, the importance of education is many magnitudes greater because an educated populace is a prerequisite for *any* participation in the global economy *at all* and is fundamental to the resolution of many of the basic humanitarian challenges they face. An education subcommittee at the 2001 UN Conference on LDCs concluded that:

Education is not only a human right but also a tool of combating marginalization in the global economy. It is a precondition to reduce unemployment, poverty and achieve social progress and democracy. Illiteracy keeps LDCs marginalized and unable to perform in the global economy. Thus education is the key to participating in and benefiting from globalization. (Interactive Thematic Session, p.3)

Further research conducted by the Center for Global Development reveals that basic education leads to improved health, higher wages and economic growth, and greater political stability: young people who have completed primary education are less than half as likely to contract HIV as those with little or no schooling and educated mothers are 50% more likely to immunize their children than mothers with no schooling. Education leads to more productive farming, which has contributed to a more than a 40% decline in malnutrition since 1970, and empowers individuals to exercise their basic democratic rights (Education and the Developing World).

Recognizing that education and prosperity in the developing world are tightly linked, the developed world made basic global education a priority. In 2000, the UN declared the provision of Universal Primary Education paramount when it announced this would be the second Millennium Development Goal. In the decade since and with the concerted focus of the world's largest NGOs and non-profits, global primary enrollment has risen to an overall rate of 89% (with an 18% increase in sub-Saharan Africa, 11% in Southern Asia, and 8% in Northern Africa) and is on track to be universal by 2020. While this result will come slightly later than had been initially hoped for and there is still much work to do, the achievement is a striking example of the progress that can be made with assiduous international focus (UN Summit Meeting, p.1).

Noticeably less attention, though, has been given to the establishment of robust and equitable tertiary education in LDCs. In numerous LDCs, particularly in Africa, the central government is not sufficiently coordinated or endowed to offer tertiary education. War torn nations and nations that have experienced natural disaster (such as Haiti) are often unable to provide this critical service at all. In countries where institutions of tertiary education do exist, they are generally not affordable to aspiring, but poor secondary graduates and are viewed as contributing to regressive outcomes. The result is that these nations tend to have college enrollment below 5% of the college-aged population with even fewer able to graduate. Those who are highly educated often leave their nation to take advantage of opportunity in the developed world resulting in a significant dearth of talent at home (Beyond 20/20 WDS, Table 15).

That the world has exerted so much energy on basic education is justified; after all, it is a prerequisite to higher education and is necessary to achieve incremental welfare improvements for the poorest of the poor. Yet, there is also a compelling argument to be made for significantly

increasing our focus on higher education as well. Institutions of higher learning are necessary to properly educate nation-building leaders *within* their respective LDCs, which will lead to stable, increasingly effective, and less corrupt governance. Institutions of higher learning are required to develop the entrepreneurs and businessmen who will create jobs and build the nation's GDP. Higher learning is required to train the engineers capable of designing the infrastructure that will alleviate water scarcity and sanitation problems and facilitate the easy movement of goods and services (all of which are foundational for an economy). Over time, higher education can help breed a new class of domestic social entrepreneurs who understand their nation's needs (and how best to go about solving them) at a more refined level than foreign aid organizations could ever hope to.

The social benefits of tertiary education are evident, but there is also substantial benefit for the students themselves. An OECD study observes a large jump in earnings with the completion of tertiary schooling (relative to secondary) that ranges from an 82% average increase in Indonesia to more than 300% in Paraguay, which suggests higher education vastly improves the long-term situations of those who undertake it. The long term return on investment (to both society and the individual) of tertiary education in the developing world most certainly dwarfs the initial cost of instruction.

With global focus on basic education, we've been pushing from the bottom with the assumption that without basic education, LDCs cannot possibly hope to move forward. Now that a universal system of primary education is nearing completion and graduation rates from secondary school are up (implying an increased need for tertiary education), we can begin to shift our focus to completing the educational scaffolding necessary to empower a new generation

of students to provide the seeds for economic growth, job creation, and meaningful participation in the global economy that will raise their nations out of chronic poverty.

But because the UN and other large organizations have not yet begun to focus on higher education in the developing world, we've been counting on the creativity of social entrepreneurs to find creative ways to fill the void where governments have failed – with some notable small-scale success. Launched in 2009 by Shai Reshef, the University of the People is a tuition free-online university that caters to committed students in the developing world. With an enrollment of approximately 500 students, the UoP is small, but the idea has received accolades from the heavyweights: the Clinton Global Initiative, Ashoka, and others. Key to its success is the employ of a strategy of distance learning which keeps costs down (around \$1,000 per student per year) so the service can be provided without cost to its beneficiaries. One important lesson learned from the UN's work providing primary and secondary schooling is that user cost is extremely important. Strategies such as abolishing school fees, providing meals, and awarding sheep to female graduates have all proved widely successful in increasing enrollment and graduation rates (UN Summit Meeting, P. 1).

Reshef's approach is particularly powerful because the internet allows the concept to be scaled up more easily than a brick and mortar approach to higher education. The capital costs and project management infrastructure associated with construction of physical universities in impoverished or unstable regions are quite high. With the internet, they don't exist. The University of the People can reach any country in the world (it has students in more than 50 countries) and can harness a global network of highly-qualified volunteer instructors (many instructors are Columbia University professors who volunteer their time).

The University of the People still faces obstacles to its widespread adoption though. Prospective students must submit a copy of their secondary transcript which can be a barrier for students who live in poor or rural areas that don't have good record keeping. The school presently requires English fluency and does not yet offer curriculum in French, Spanish, or other commonly spoken languages in the developing world. Further, internet penetration rates are inversely correlated with Reshef's target: the world's poor. To address this, the UoPeople is experimenting with a novel concept: remote computer centers.

The University recently established a student computer center in earthquake-ravaged Port-au-Prince, fully equipped with a satellite connection, back-up generators, and guards (all very limited resources in Haiti). Elysée and Sherly, two young UoP students in Haiti, recount their experiences there:

After high school, I could not go to university because it was too expensive. Every day, I would stand in the street talking with my friends about what we would do if we had money. We hoped that 2010 would be better, but then the earthquake destroyed everything, houses, businesses and many lives. Since that day, I have been sleeping in the street, under a tent, and nobody cares about my education anymore. University of the People is better than food and a tent. And education is even better than a visa or a green card (Reshef). –Elsée, Haiti

When I was a little girl, my dream was always to become a businesswoman, to manage things and people. In this sense, business administration at UoPeople can help me to realize my wish. I hope to gain from this experience because it's always important to

grow... And I am sure that with the business administration courses in Uopeople, I will be a good administrator for helping my dear Haiti. –Sherly, Haiti

These accounts suggest that remote computer centers can have a hugely positive impact and hold the key to reaching those areas where both hope and internet are scarcest. Working with the Haitian Connection Network to place its first 16 Haitian students (like Elsé and Sherley), the UoPeople seeks to expand the capacity of its computer center to accommodate 250 Haitian students in the coming months.

The school is still budding. It only awards two degrees: business administration and computer science and has not yet been accredited, so the degrees it awards are not internationally recognized. Nevertheless, it offers a fairly broad curriculum that includes courses in Ethics and Social Responsibility as well as Greek and Roman Civilization (a full course catalog is available at <http://www.uopeople.org/167609>). Students in the same course are sub-divided into groups of 15-20 (their “class”) in which they are expected to actively participate by posting questions, responding to questions posted by other students, commenting on course readings, and responding to discussion questions. All reading material is available online for free, so the students do not need to worry about purchasing books. Professors design the curriculum, guide the class, and respond to questions. Just as at a physical institution of higher learning, students are responsible for completing writing exercises, essays, and exams. While a physical university with physical instruction may be educationally preferable in certain respects, Rashef’s approach works well as an immediate response to the exigent need for higher education.

It’s important to take a step back and take a look at how this idea first came about and what is going on behind the scenes that makes it successful. Shai Reshef worked at Kidum

Group, “a for-profit educational services company (in Israel)” for twenty years prior to his founding the University of the People, serving as its Chairman until 2005. His prior experience in international education innovation doubtlessly contributed to his perception of the need for higher education in LDCs and qualified him to spearhead such an endeavor. To organize his school, Reshef recruited an array of Columbia University professors to serve as deans of curriculum (Computer Science, Business, and General Studies) and relies on other professional volunteers and staff to provide instruction. Reshef has also set up several advisory committees consisting of a diverse array of professors and thinkers from around the world. For resources, the University of the People depends on the generosity of its benefactors and volunteers as most other non-profit organizations do (About Us).

Bhadra Man Tuladhara took a different approach to the higher education shortages in Nepal: he founded a university. By 1985, several good highschools were churning out good students at an increasing rate. The one institution of higher education in the country, Tribhuvan University, a state university, was overcrowded and had a very high failure rate. It closed frequently due to political instability and could not meet the education needs of the country. Consequently, Nepal’s brightest students sought to complete their educations elsewhere, leading to the expenditure of millions of rupees outside the country (primarily in neighboring India) and risking the loss of Nepal’s best talent due to emigration.

Badra Man Tuladhara, an academic with a Ph.D. in theoretical mathematics from Peoples’ Friendship University in Moscow had some experience building schools. In 1965, he was responsible for the planning and development of the physical facilities of Ananda Kuti Science College and served as campus chief of the Institute of Applied Science of Technology, which he helped establish.

Tuladhar sought to establish a private, undergraduate institution of the highest quality to set a new standard of educational excellence for his country. When he became an Ashoka fellow in 1991, his new university was operating on a temporary, borrowed campus with 300 students. Tuladhar's plan for Kathmandu University then was to gradually grow the institution over 10 years as he worked to raise the ten million dollars that would be needed to construct the facilities he envisioned. At full strength, it was intended to have 810 students and 70 faculty members. Tuladhar worked closely with civic leaders and his school was recognized by the central government in 1991. Two decades later, the university is flourishing. It has more than 3,000 students, a built space of 380,000 square feet, and several graduate programs. It now has several branches that enroll an additional 4,000 students across Nepal (Bhadra Man Tuladhar).

Kathmandu University is not free like the UofPeople. In fact, it's extremely expensive. While a limited number of scholarships are available, a Kathmandu undergraduate education costs 425,000 Nepalese Rupees (for all four years), which is about \$5900 USD in a country whose average per capita income is \$472 USD, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). Although expensive, the price reflects the cost of providing a brick and mortar education, and by all accounts, an excellent one. Kathmandu University is a non-profit, non-governmental institution and depends on the support of International donors, INGOs, government, and local communities for additional funding (Admission Section – Cost and Expenses).

The high price of an education at Kathmandu relative to Nepali purchasing power demonstrates the challenge of providing affordable education in the developing world without innovating to reduce costs. While Kathmandu has been a resounding success in addressing Nepal's need for additional educational capacity and academic excellence, it is not available to

those who cannot afford it and who don't manage to secure one of the (mostly partial) scholarships.

Exploits University is a third example of higher education in the developing world. Perhaps the newest university in the world, Exploits was founded in September 2010 in Lilongwe, Malawi with the mission to “train competent scholars with relevant skills such as problem solving, decision making, research and analytical skills necessary to improve economic performance of Malawi and beyond.” It is a private institution supported by the Pentecostal Life Church in the US. The attendance fee is even higher than Kathmandu's at \$3600 USD per year in a country where the per capita income is lower than Nepal's at \$369 per year or just over a dollar per day. There is no mention of financial assistance on their website. With this premium tuition fee, the question of whether the school will actually be able to serve Malawi and Malawians is a more than legitimate one (About Us).

Exploits has not yet been accredited by the government of Malawi and there is no word on the existence of a campus yet – only a P.O. Box is listed on their website. This raises a couple issues: to families and students who are asked to spend their life's savings on higher education with the hope that it will better their situation, it can be very difficult to gauge the legitimacy of the university. An unscientific comment at the bottom of a news article about Exploits asks: “I want to know more about this university particularly courses offered, fees and duration for its course either Diploma or Degree as well as how serious are they as to compared with these worthless colleges we see in our towns of Malawi, where their intention is just to eat people's money?” (Jimu) While biased, the comment indirectly raises a prescient issue: there is very little oversight or accountability for what is taught in the classrooms of LDCs and no internationally recognized system of accreditation that has been applied to many of these schools. This raises

some questions: are these institutions keeping their promises to their students and how valuable are diplomas awarded by these institutions? Are these diplomas even recognized by those in the developed world?

What happens to college graduates after completing school in the developing world (whether that tertiary school is virtual or physical)? Often, rather than staying in their home country, they immigrate to a country with greater opportunity and a higher standard of living, leaving their homeland with a lack of talent. Without this talent, their LDC is less attractive to investment from foreign companies and lacks those with the skills that can be put towards building the nation and economy to alleviate poverty. Without income generating activity in the LDC, the government is only able to collect a pittance in taxes and not able to adequately provide basic public goods like clean water, roads for commerce, and electricity. Thus, emigration sets off a self-reinforcing cycle: as new graduates see no opportunity, none is built. It is imperative, then that the preconditions for domestic opportunity creation are in place so that a critical mass of well-educated citizens can be built. Among these preconditions: a legal system that protects property and innovation, access to startup capital, and basic infrastructure.

To fully empower the impoverished nations of the developing world, we must ensure that the increasing ranks of ambitious secondary graduates have quality, affordable access to higher education so they can develop the skills necessary to lead their nations and better their own situations. While the provision of tertiary education is quite expensive relative to the purchasing power the average citizen of an LDC has; new and innovative approaches (like Reshef's) to reducing costs must be employed to ensure access. There is no substitute, though, for excellence in instruction, a model which can be more than successfully employed as in the case of

Kathmandu University. A solid base of well-educated men and women will form the foundation for long term growth, just governance, and prosperity of developing nations.

Works Cited

"About Us." *University of the People*. Web. 11 Jan. 2011.

<<http://www.uopeople.org/groups/tuition-free-education>>.

"About Us." *Exploits University*. Web. 29 Jan. 2011. <http://exploitsuni.org/about_us.php#>.

"Admission - Cost and Expenses." *Kathmandu University*. Web. 29 Jan. 2011.

<<http://www.ku.edu.np/admission/index.php?go=cost#>>.

"Beyond 20/20 WDS - Report Folders." *UNESCO Institute for Statistics*. Web. 27 Jan. 2011.

<http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/ReportFolders/ReportFolders.aspx?IF_ActivePath=P,50&IF_Language=eng>.

"Bhadra Man Tuladhar." *Ashoka Fellow*. 1991. Web. 28 Jan. 2011.

<<http://www.ashoka.org/fellow/2748>>.

Education and the Developing World. Issue brief. Center for Global Development, 12 June 2006.

Web. 27 Jan. 2011. <<http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/2844>>.

Financing Education - Investments and Returns. Issue brief. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2002. Web. 10 Jan. 2011.

<http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/pdf/wei/WEI_ExecSummary_Eng.pdf>.

Interactive Thematic Session: Education For All. Proc. of Third UN Conference on LDCs, Brussels.

18 May 2001. Web. 10 Jan. 2011. <<http://www.unesco.org/ldc/ldcefa.pdf>>.

Jimu, Christopher. "Exploits University to Open in Lilongwe." *The Nation*. 10 Aug. 2010. Web. 29 Jan. 2011.

<http://www.nationmw.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3937:exploits-university-to-open-in-lilongwe&catid=12:company-track&Itemid=13>.

Reshef, Shai. "Haiti: Where Education Is Better Than a Green Card." *The Huffington Post*. 18

Nov. 2010. Web. 11 Jan. 2011. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shai-reshef/haiti-where-education-is-_b_784851.html>.

United Nations Summit Meeting of the General Assembly. UN Millennium Development Goals

Fact Sheet, 20 Sept. 2010. Web. 10 Jan. 2011.

<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG_FS_2_EN.pdf>.