

Producing Textbooks In Developing Countries—II

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THE textbook production process consists of three basic, consecutive actions, the design of pedagogic or teaching materials, their manufacturing (Printing), and their distribution.

It is reasonable to expect that a government would wish to maintain control of textbook content to see that it is consistent with curricular objectives. But the content can be designed in many different ways: as a regular civil service function of the ministry of education, or by the publishing industry. In the latter case, content specifications can be established by ministries of education, while the actual design (how many chapters? what reading level? etc.) can be decided on the basis of competitive bids by private firms. The process can also include both elements (as in Turkey) with some books being designed on the basis of competitive bidding, while others continue to be designed within the ministry of education. Ministries of education in Malaysia and Mexico began by designing all their textbooks in-house, but shifted to external publishers in part to facilitate the development of local publishing industries. Today their competitive bidding extends to international costs and better quality than totally in-house design. An argument against this is that in many countries there is not enough local publishing capacity. But that capacity can be developed only if a shift in policy occurs in the ministry of education.

Printing. Sometimes, ministries of education also manufacture their textbooks in-house, to preserve jobs or simply to increase the use of their installed printing equipment. A government printer may charge an artificially subsidized price to the ministry of education, but this does not mean that the job will be less expensive in real terms for the public sector than one done by a private printer.

Distribution. It is not necessarily desirable or financially advantageous for a government to distribute printed materials through its own civil servants, transport, and specialized storage facilities. There may be

less costly and more efficient alternatives. Admittedly, books may be more difficult to distribute than some products; however, if soap and matches get efficiently distributed to rural areas through private companies, it may be possible to distribute textbooks through similar mechanisms.

Factors Affecting Choice

Three economic factors need to be weighed in deciding whether it is better the ministry of education or private companies to design, manufacture, and distribute textbooks. First is the size of readership. Indonesia, for example, has more children in school than the United States and Canada combined. In Sierra Leone, on the other hand, the size of the readership is small. In general, the larger the readership, the more likely that a viable local textbook industry can develop.

The second factor is the language used. The more international the language, the more likely that there will be relevant materials already available. For subjects taught in Spanish, Portuguese, English, or French, a variety of texts exist on the international market. For a local language or languages, a government may have to develop the materials itself, involving some cost. Similarly, the more international a subject (E.G. arithmetic versus national history) the more competitive textbook production would be and the less expensive it will be to develop such materials.

The third factor is the level of curriculum specialisation. If books on university level physics, geography, or natural sciences are being developed a ministry of education will have to invest in materials of good visual quality. Often, it is feasible to mix the contents: a ministry of education may mix its own textual material with imported high-quality visuals that already exist, thus avoid-

ing the cost of duplicating. The key element today is the development of new graphics and printing technologies. It is a relatively simple task for even low-income countries to sponsor the production of educational materials using designs drawn from widely divergent sources. It is no longer a question of simply selecting between local and foreign materials.

Protection

Countries often try to protect the design, manufacturing and distribution of local textbook industries from foreign competition. Several reasons are given to justify these policies (and the costs they impose on society as a whole). One reason is national interest. Textbooks must be manufactured locally to preserve a strong national identity. Another reason is the protection of local employment. The grace period required for the development of strong local capacity is yet another reason. The problem is that such "infant" industries end up being protected for years in the case of educational materials, often for 25-30 years.

Protection is also seen as saving foreign exchange. But local production raises other problems. Foreign exchange is still usually required to import paper and maintain printing presses. When foreign exchange is scarce, the presses may stop running for lack of materials or spare parts, with the result that textbooks are not produced. Whether foreign or local manufacturing requires more foreign exchange is a matter of debate. Regulations must be examined carefully to see if protective measures will actually save on foreign exchange.

Conclusion. By and large, all countries seek the same goal to provide high-quality education to all children, at the least cost. In developing countries, public finances are low, and resources cannot easily be found

by reductions from other sectors. Ministries of education must save money without jeopardizing their objectives. They cannot expect to provide all educational services themselves, in-house, and free of private cost.

Changing the textbook production process does not have to affect standard educational goals nor result in books of lesser quality, or whose aims are not consonant with national goals. Neither are changes in the production process an ideological matter. It is a question of good management. The responsibility of the education ministry is to manage the sector well, and to set political orientations aside in attaining that objective.

Further, it is not necessarily true that removing protection from textbook production in developing countries will benefit publishers in developed countries. Companies in Colombia, India, Mexico, and Nigeria now export textbooks and textbook technology. Changing production processes will likely benefit publishing industries in developing countries because they enhance competition. By tapping local talent for writing, printing, publishing and distributing textbooks in their countries, ministries of education can encourage exports to other countries. But other countries will not become a market unless they too have been reconsidering their production process and open their textbook market to international competition.

In the final analysis, the yawning gap between the demand and supply of quality textbooks makes it imperative to alter approaches to their production in developing countries. By the year 2000, about 80 per cent of the global school population or some 626 million children will be enrolled in schools in the developing world. These numbers provide a strong incentive to educational policymakers to change their views on textbook production in developing countries.

(Concluded)
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