Abstract

Since the launch of the OECD Skills Strategy in 2011 not much has been said about the role that it might play in the global education agenda for development after the 2015. The OECD has expressed the political will to extend its geographical focus and enhance its influence in non-member countries, and the Skills Strategy is strongly aligned with this aim. The lack of attention paid to the skills sector by other development agencies opens a window of opportunity for the OECD in the post 2015 scenario. In addition, the Directorate for Education has a comparative advantage over these agencies because it has developed an international survey of adult skills (PIAAC) that will allow them to reproduce the PISA governance mechanism in the skills sector. The Better Skills report, the first report of the OECD Skills Strategy, outlines the main conceptual and political elements of the OECD discourse on skills. In contrast with other previous work of the Directorate for Education, the Better Skills report puts less emphasis on the employability of the graduates and brings the skills utilisation paradigm to the centre of the stage. Policy recommendations of the Better Skills report stress the importance of general vs job specific skills, advocate for the substitution of social benefits by training opportunities, and underline the necessary coordination between educational, labour and economic policies to upgrade the profile of jobs. This conference paper suggests that it is necessary to problematize the possible effects that the OECD Skills Strategy might have on the educational policymaking in developing countries. It is argued that the OECD should be careful when recommending good policy practices from member countries to the governments in non-member countries. Given the very different socioeconomic and political conditions that face member and non-member countries, the travel of policy solutions from the former to the latter might be particularly problematic. It is also argued that ignoring the politics of skills formation and its implications for social justice might undermine the relevance and effectiveness of the OECD recommendations in non-member countries. Finally, the paper suggests that the OECD economistic approach to education and skills might benefit from the contributions made by social justice theories to the debates on education and human development.
Introduction

In this document I outline some speculative ideas about the role that the OECD Skills Strategy (OSS) might play in the post 2015 scenario. The document aims to be an invitation to debate the role of skills in the development agenda post 2015. The document is also a good opportunity to put order in some ideas that might be relevant for a research project that will start in October 2013 and that will analyse the OSS discourse and PIAAC\(^1\) data from a political economy perspective.

In the first section of the document I argue that the OECD Directorate for Education has the political will, the capacity and the opportunity to become a very relevant actor in the international debates on skills and development after the 2015. In the second section I describe what I consider the most innovative analytical and political contributions of the first OSS report\(^2\) (Better Skills report). In the third and final section of the paper I share some concerns about the possible effects of the OSS in developing countries from a critical perspective.

The OECD Skills Strategy and the post 2015 scenario

While the OECD has gained a leading role in the international debates on education policy among its member countries, the growth of emerging economies and their impact on the global balance of power have challenged the traditional geographical focus of the organization forcing it to actively enhance its global reach. The OSS is coherent with the increased interest of the organization in extending its influence beyond member countries. For this reason the Better Skills report makes repeated reference to the situation of jobs and skills in “emerging economies”\(^3\) although it is mainly focused on the situation in OECD countries. In the following lines I argue that there are good reasons to think that the ongoing OSS can have a big influence on the definition of skills policies in developing countries.

Firstly, the prioritization of basic education by MDGs and EFA goals has neglected the growing needs of many developing countries in expanding and reforming their further education and skills sectors. The renewed global interest in TVET and skills development in the post 2015 debates is in fact a clear recognition of this deficit in the previous agenda. The misrecognition of the skills sector in the Education Agenda for Development opens a window of opportunity for other international actors willing to occupy this space and to work with developing countries. Given the scarcity of alternatives, it is reasonable to expect

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\(^1\) PIAAC will assess literacy and numeracy skills and the ability to solve problems in technology-rich environments of the adult population. A population of 5000 adults (16-65 years old) will be interviewed in each of the 24 countries participating in the first round and the 9 countries cited


\(^3\) Emerging economies, emerging countries and middle-income countries are cited more than 15 times in different sections of the report. The report also makes explicit reference to the OECD Education for Development Framework and the horizontal OECD Strategy for Development (pp. 107).
that a substantial number of developing countries will become good clients of the OSS and its policy recommendations, although most of these recommendations were not designed to address the needs of these countries.

Secondly, the OECD Directorate for Education has a competitive advantage over the rest of the development agencies that is the production and comparative use of indicators data (Martens, 2007). The success of PISA has provided a prototype for the Directorate for Education to expand its global testing approaches to the domain of adult skills through PIAAC (Sellar and Lingard, 2013). PIAAC is the flagship initiative of the OSS, a tool that will allow the organization to rank countries against others, in order to construct skills policy problems from these comparisons (Grek, 2010) and to leverage skills policy solutions globally. PIAAC will provide a scientific legitimacy to the skills discourse of the OECD that is not available to the rest of the international development agencies.

Thirdly, the OECD Directorate for Education has already demonstrated that it is able to work directly with developing countries. It is very well known that the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) was very influential in the definition of the development goals (King, 2007), but we should note that not all the “development activity” of the OECD is done through DAC. The OECD Directorate for Education has been working directly with developing countries through its Division of Non-Member Economies, and we cannot forget that some member countries are also middle income countries (Turkey and Mexico). In addition, the Directorate for Education in coordination with DAC members and other development agencies (i.e. World Bank and UNESCO) has recently launched the PISA for Development project with the aim of increasing the policy relevance of PISA in developing countries.

In summary, my argument is that the OSS led by the Directorate for Education has the opportunity to play a very influential role in the global skills agenda for development in the post 2015 scenario. There are a variety of good reasons to believe that the OSS should be taken into account when discussing the skills for development agenda. These include the lack of attention paid to the skills sector by other development agencies, the competitive advantage of having developed PIAAC and the incipient experience of working with developing countries as in the case of the PISA for Development project. The following sections outline the main characteristics of the OSS approach and its possible implications for the education and development debates.

**The OECD Skills Strategy before PIAAC**

The main concern of the OECD is with economic development and its interest in education policy has always been conditioned to the contribution of education and skills to the competitiveness of knowledge-based economies (Robertson, 2005). The OSS is the latest initiative of the Directorate for Education to increase its political relevance within the OECD by extending the human capital agenda across the rest of the organization. The OSS is led by the Directorate for Education with the participation of other directorates, such as the Directorate for
Employment, Labour and Social Affairs and the Programme for Local and Economic Development. Contrary to what the Directorate for Education did in the past with PISA, the Better Skills report has been published before the release of PIAAC data. This Better Skills report collates evidence and knowledge from different projects and directorates across the organization in order to prepare the analytical framework that will guide the policy recommendations of the OSS after PIAAC. The following lines analyze some aspects of this conceptual framework and the policy recommendations presented in the Better Skills report.

In relation to the contribution of education and skills to economic development, the OSS shares a similar level of optimism with the rest of the work of the Directorate for Education. For the OSS, “skills have become the global currency of twenty-first century economies” (p. 10) and investing in skills is “the single most effective way of not just promoting growth but also distributing its benefits more fairly [through jobs]” (p. 11). This aprioristic assumption does not prevent the OSS from recognising the difficulties of translating the investment in education and skills development into innovation, productivity and growth (Brown et al., 2011). In fact, the main analytical interest of the OSS lies in how the OECD understands the relation between education and work in advanced economies. While traditional static manpower forecast approaches conceptualised this problem as a mismatch between jobs and qualifications that led to over-education and skill shortages, the OSS approach adopts a more nuanced overview of imbalances that incorporates skill gaps and skill underutilisation as major issues. The relation between learning, qualifications and jobs is dynamic for a variety of factors occurring both in the supply and the demand side of the equation. On the supply side, individuals experience skill gain and skill loss over throughout their lifetime. On the demand side, skills requirements are not fixed but evolve with the adoption of technologies and new practices in the workplace.

When making policy recommendations to govern this dynamic skills mismatch, the OSS combines the traditional emphasis of the Directorate for Education on the employability of graduates and the responsiveness of the education and training system to the labour market needs (OECD, 2010) with a new emphasis on the change of work and organisational practices in order to improve the utilisation of highly skilled workers. Under this framework, the submission of education and training policies to the demands of the firms is substituted by a whole-government approach to innovation and economic growth where the coordination between the departments of education, finance and labour under the same skills strategy is a key element to guarantee that the necessary incentives are put in place in order to develop a high skills economy.

The Better Skills report identifies three main areas of intervention for governments: skills development, skills activation and skills utilisation. First, the main recommendation in skills development is the emphasis on general vs specific skills. General skills include both “foundation skills” (problem solving, literacy, numeracy, reading) and “higher order skills” (creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration). These higher order skills are more portable than job specific skills and are presented as the key skills for the work environment of the 21st century. Secondly, skills activation policies consist of
cutting social benefits in order to incentivise the labour market participation of different social groups (women, immigrants, unemployed, disabled people). Labour market flexibility, low social protection and intensive training policies are presented as the most effective activation policies. Thirdly, skills utilisation policies require a coordinated effort to help firms to move into higher value-added product and service markets. Education and training systems are supposed to be able to shape current demand for skills through the provision of graduates to the labour market who are well equipped to engage in innovative activities and entrepreneurial endeavours.

In summary, the OSS is trying to renovate the OECD economistic approach to skills by bringing the skills utilisation paradigm to the centre of the stage. The employability of graduates is not longer solely the responsibility of the education and training system. The skills utilisation discourse puts the emphasis on the institutional conditions that are necessary for markets and firms to use the skills of their employees effectively. Policy recommendations stress the importance of general and portable skills, the substitution of social benefits by training opportunities and the coordination between educational, labour and economic policies to upgrade the profile of jobs.

Some emerging issues

The growing interest of the OECD Directorate for Education in non-member countries should be welcomed by most of the people working in the field of education and development. The technical capacity and expertise of this institution have been widely recognised, and one would expect that its contributions would add some rigour to current educational debates in developing countries. Having said that, and given the impact that the activity of the OECD Directorate for Education might have in the post 2015 scenario; it is also necessary to problematize the possible effects of this activity, and the OSS gives us an excellent opportunity to do it. In the following lines I outline three concerns about the influence that OSS might have on the skills agenda for development.

Firstly, the implementation of policy solutions from member countries in non-member countries that face very different socioeconomic conditions might reproduce the problems of modernisation approaches to development. The work of the OECD Directorate for Education is dominated by the comparative use of indicators data and the promotion of best policy practices from leading countries. This method of work when applied to skills policies is already very problematic and controversial because it might not pay enough attention to the local and institutional specificities of member countries (Green, 2006). One could easily imagine that this method of work would become even more problematic when comparing member and non-member countries and trying to implement successful policies from rich countries in poor countries. Poor countries have specific problems that impede the development and implementation of their own high skills strategies. Poverty, low fiscal capacity of the state, labour market informality and underemployment are just some of the
specificities that a skills strategy for non-member countries should take into account.

Secondly, ignoring the politics of skills formation and its implications for social justice might undermine the relevance and effectiveness of the skills strategies in non-member countries. While the OSS has been very successful in integrating some conceptual contributions from the political economy of skills into an analytical framework dominated by the human capital approach, the OSS still neglects the conflictive nature of the positional competition for skills and the benefits of innovation and productivity gains (Brown, 1999). Many governments in developing and donor countries will feel very comfortable with a set of recommendations that are presented as “technical” solutions for a more effective skills formation, but political economy research has shown that most of these “technical” solutions will fail if the problems of large inequalities, lack of social rights and political marginalization are not the direct focus of these interventions.

Thirdly, the economistic approach to skills formation might lead to a productivist model of development. As it has been argued before, the economistic approach to education and skills is a strategic component of the program of work of the OECD Directorate for Education. This economistic approach overlooks the contributions from social justice theories (i.e. capabilities theory) to the current debates on education and human development. Individuals should not be reduced to human resources for economic exploitation and accumulation (McGrath, 2012) and national skills strategies should not be used to socialize workers to the demands of employers and markets (Coffield, 1999). The OSS might benefit from looking at the work done by other international organisations such UNESCO and their aim to integrate national skills policies within human development strategies.

The concerns outlined above should not prevent us from recognising the positive contribution that the OSS can make to skills development in non-member countries. These concerns have to be understood as emerging issues that need to be problematized by development stakeholders and that can be, eventually, the object of academic research.

List of references


