

## **DECISION MAKING MODELS ON EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM CHANGES**

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**Abstract:** *Changes in national education system should start as an objective of diagnosis from which to establish a long-term goal. From a historical perspective, this goal has coincided with a country program. A country with a strong educational system can support a sustainable economy, a well-qualified labour market and a better life for every citizen. This goal is specified in all the government programs of the parties that are entering a political competition. A strong economy can provide more money for education, and the formula is valid both ways - more money in education leads to an economic gain. Today few will deny that education is a necessity for economic growth and, above all, that education is the guarantee for democratic and cultural development (Lundgren; 2002). In this article, I will demonstrate how such an objective can be partially missed because of the fact that the system changes were targeted and made only in crisis areas, not globally, across the system. Thus the legislative incoherence and confusion between centralism and autonomy made the system quickly adapt and the assumed goal to be more and more difficult realize. The political class has adopted a new model of making public policy, that I will call "to extinguish the fire". Most of the changes in this area have been made in this way: large fires were extinguished, it was patched where the holes were too big, but the fire continued to smoulder. Hence, teachers and students have also adapted to the times and the results are visible to all national and international tests/ indicators.*

**Keywords:** *Decisions making, education changes, human capital*

Who are the policy makers in higher education? In general, all non-profit organizations or the professional organizations can and are encouraged by the national law to participate in the creation of new public policies in the field of education. Through the law of decisional transparency, all projects that are under public debate can receive comments from professional associations or even simple citizens. Moreover, when they are discussed in the specialized committees in the Parliament, they can come up with suggestions for improvements that can be taken over by parliamentarians in the form of amendments. These organizations can raise public awareness and thus change the vote of the parliamentary majority.

The Government, the Parliament and the Presidency have regular work meetings with these organizations. They can come up with requirements to change an article of the law or even suggestions for new laws or governmental decisions. It should be noted that the institution that has the biggest initiative to invite these organizations is the Presidency - due to the national project initiated by Presidency, called the "Educated Romania" (Matei, Antonovici, Săvulescu; 2016). At other institutions, rottenly, the organizations requested meetings, access to working sessions of specialized committees or organize workshops to invite parliamentarians and government members.

In general, the educational trade unions have often proposals related to the salaries of teachers and they are reproached after each negotiation that the main claim is not the quality of education - student interest. In such discussions and negotiations, associations of students and parents, traditionally come with suggestions on the educational process: finalizing the studies and the application of the knowledge acquired on the labor market, the number of hours per week, the rights of the students etc.

The numbers and premises from which the majority of the educational Romanian debates start are the same for every actor that is involved in the decisional act. But the identified solutions are different in the moment that they come to governance.

The identified solutions by the act of the governance are often different from the engagements that are made before coming to governance. The "National Pact for Education" has been signed ever since 2008 by all the political parties by the Romanian Academy President, a significant number of NGOs and the President of Romania.

The Pact provides a number of objectives as follows:

- The modernization of the educational system and of the institutions between 2008 and 2013 in order to increase the competitiveness;
- Ensuring a minimum 6% of the GDP for education and the minimum with 1% for research in the timeframe 2008-2013;
- Unrestricted access to free education at all levels;
- Decentralization of education;
- Implementing the principle "money follows the student";
- Adoption of a charter of human rights and freedoms in education;
- Overcoming the gap between the rural and urban.

All of these 7 targets have been partially or totally missed. Although the Law on National Education stipulated as of 2011 the mandatory allocation of 6% of GDP for education and a minimum of 1% for research, the two areas did not get more than 3.5% in one year. The children's rights to education have been further restricted by not paying the commuters, not providing the minimum comfort conditions in classes (we have hundreds of thousands of children in non-modern schools every year and institutions responsible for anti-fire control do not grant them operating authorization). The "money follows the student" principle has been introduced in the law, but it has been badly applied and has created more inequalities between schools. The gap between rural and urban schools has widened, for example at the 2017 National Assessment Examination - 50% of rural students have scored less than grade 5 in mathematics.

According to official numbers released by the National Statistics Institute over 60% of students that enter in the system are lost on the road: 15% do not finish 8th grade, another 30% drop out of high school and half of the remaining students do not take the Baccalaureate exam. Thus, half of the generation is set aside by the inability of the system to provide equal opportunities to quality, equal, free and fair education. One of the two young men who have reached the age of 18 possess no qualifications and no real chance to return to school. Youth unemployment is the highest in Europe. NSI says that the unemployment rate reaches its highest level (20.4%) among youth (15-24 years).

Romania is at the forefront of labor shortages in Europe (72% of Romanian companies do not find qualified personnel for the jobs they have been bidding for). Romania cannot retain (133 out of 138, according to the Global Competitiveness Report 2016-2017) and can no longer attract talent (127 out of 138). Graduates of any form of education have employment difficulties because of the lack of correlation between school and university curriculum with the requirements of the labor market.

The efficiency of a public policy can be predicted based on the economic model practiced by each state. Romania gave up the centralized economic model after the fall of communism in 1989. The transition was difficult and rather long. We can say that the transit ended with the

accession of Romania to the EU. During this period, the power from Bucharest tried to reform education. It was changed twice (1995 and 2001). But in the years after the new law, the government has carried out hundreds of amendments by emergency ordinances. There were several emergency ordinances and legislative initiatives voted by Parliament that changed the content of the Law almost entirely (e.g. GEO 49/2014 amended 97 articles of 365 according to the Law). As I will continue to show, changes in this area have not taken into account an objective target or a long-term goal, a vision for the country, but rather it was the political factor that operated modifications in the areas of "crisis".

Thus, through these repeated changes, the decentralization has turned into centralization and the autonomy of the school units has been replaced by a political centralism. More often than not, the only thing that was changed was a single article, others have remained in force, creating as such incoherent and inapplicable laws. Local authorities, for example, while hiring in schools and signing management contracts with the director, cannot dismiss him. Or another bizarre example, schools organize the contest for a teaching position, but they could not dismiss the teachers who were not performing and a teacher who held a position in a school where there was no competition in the competition - could soon be transferred to another school on the same job because he is a teacher in the national education system and not a teacher at x school. The confusion between centralism and autonomy, legislative incoherence has made the system to quickly adapt. It is exactly the mode of the political class that I will call "extinguish the fire". That's how most of the changes have been made in this area: large fires have faded, where the holes were too big, but the fire continued to cower. As a result, teachers, and students have adapted to the times, and the results are seen in all national and international tests.

If in the socialist system the state knew that in the next years it would need 2000 engineers, 3000 tailors and 4500 turners - then schools would receive a number of tuition places to cover those predictable needs. After 1989, the free market had to decide which schools are sustainable and which must disappear. But cutting subsidies for existing schools would have been total chaos. So, all educational units received subsidies as before. The main criteria that was taken into consideration was "keeping jobs for teachers". This argument is being debated today when discussing the modification of the Framework Programs (of the subjects to be taught in the coming years). Each union trade and professor says his subject is the most important and the specialists who have prepared these Framework Programs are also criticized by teachers and the political class. Therefore, the decisions that are made are, in most cases, with a low degree of reform / innovation.

There is no national statistics about the quality of studies related to labor market needs. And when the National Education Ministry does them - they remain at the level of strategies. These are not the basis for regulatory changes. Little by little, the market began to self-regulate. Faculties that were searched for in the 1990s, for example, Law or Journalism, are no longer so attractive - there is not such a big competition. For example, a significant proportion of young people with higher education have engaged in unskilled jobs<sup>1</sup>. Although there have been a few years when vocational schools have not received the schooling number (they have practically been abolished - vocational schools have had to convert to technology or vocational high-

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<sup>1</sup> The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education shows that 80% of graduates from Romanian faculties work in other fields than those for which they have been trained - <http://www.aracis.ro/>.

schools) there is now a program encouraging vocational education. However, the number of scholarships covered by the state was not occupied 100%. Therefore, human capital theories can not be verified in this case.

Education is now universally recognized as a form of investment in human capital that yields economic benefits and contributes to a country's future wealth by increasing the productive capacity of its people. Thus expenditure on education can be partially justified in terms of the potential contribution of education to economic growth. (Woodhall, M., 2004, p.23). An UNICEF-Romania study<sup>2</sup> launched in 2004 had the following conclusions: "Romania will lose between 12 and 17 billion Euros in 2015-2025 if it maintains education investment at the current level, and an increase in the education budget by 6% of GDP would mean economic growth of up to 2.95%, compared to 2% ". In addition, constant investment in education would solve problems with labor shortages, citizens will be better paid and will reduce the risk of marginalization. "One more year of school increases in earnings by 8-9 percent, reduces the risk of becoming unemployed by eight percent and that of serious health problems, by 8.2 percent." The graduates of the secondary superior educational system earn with 25-31 % more than the ones who only graduated the primary and the secondary school. The earnings of the people who graduated university are bigger with 67% than the ones of the students that give up on school after the secondary superior school.

In view of the importance that planners in developing countries now attach to the goal of maximizing economic growth, it is extremely important to have some means of assessing the economic impact of education. It is now recognized, however, that this is only a part of the complete picture. The concept of human capital that underlies the application of cost-benefit to education has been further developed since the 1960s. In the 1980s and 1990s, critics argued that the concept was too narrow. The economic benefits of education are important; however, the social, political and cultural consequences of education must not be neglected. Sociologists such as Coleman (1988) have introduced the concept of social capital, which takes account of social relationships and networks as well as non-economic factors such as trust and co-operation. International agencies now emphasize that human capital and social capital may be equally important in contributing to development (Woodhall, M., 2004, p.25).

Normally any reform in the educational system should also start from the needs of the labor market. The country report prepared by the European Commission for 2017 shows very clearly that the proportion of young people who are not professionally and do not have any education or training program (NEET) remains high (p.23). Two-thirds of NEET youth remain inactive. In addition, the European Commission also notes that the unequal supply of quality education affects the potential of human capital. Graduates of any type of study have poor results in basic skills. There is a high and rising rate of early school leaving (about 19%) and high school graduates will not meet the growing need for skilled labor. In Romania, the level of public spending on education is among the lowest in the EU. If this continues, these factors will continue to undermine the potential of human capital and economic growth (pp.26-27).

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<sup>2</sup> "Costurile Investiției Insuficiente în Educație în România", UNICEF România, 2014

## CONCLUSIONS

The traditional view of the role of the government in a market economy is that the government is attempting to maximize social welfare. Any decision on investment in education must be made taking into account the balance between costs and benefits. That is what all economic theories say. When it comes to politics, there is an inevitable variable: how many votes can one or another measure. Obviously, any rational person would balance the future of the children and the of the country, but when changes are made to the educational system, it must be taken into account that the employees of the system of the trade unions must represent the interests of parents and children. Radical changes can cause perplexity and some resistance to change, as was the case with the National Education Law no. 1/2011, which was a reformist one that scared the system. From this point of view, it has been modified to please everyone: the local, central, system employees, etc. For real reform there must be a system for evaluation and quality assurance. This must build on an agreed division of responsibility, which means that there must be both central and local evaluations and quality assurance. Reforms must embrace all levels and all instruments for governance (Lundgren; 2002).

Any other change in educational policy should be done through a national consensus, but also by the very clear engagements of local and central public authorities to provide money for true reform. Otherwise, any national law or pact will remain a simple paper forgotten through the offices of the political people.

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