

## **UNESCO CONSIDERS THE NATURE OF THE 'COMMON GOOD'**

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Public good theory has a long tradition and has its foundation in market economics.<sup>138</sup> In the 1950s, public goods were defined as those goods 'which all enjoy in common in the sense that each individual's consumption of such a good leads to no subtractions from any other individual's consumption of that good'.<sup>139</sup> The transfer of an essentially economic notion to the field of education has always been somewhat problematic. Public goods are considered to be more directly linked to public and state policy. The term *public* often leads to a common misunderstanding that 'public goods' are goods *provided by the public*.<sup>140</sup> On the other hand, *common goods* have been defined as those goods that, irrespective of any public or private origin, are characterized by a binding destination and necessary for the realization of the fundamental rights of all people.<sup>141</sup>

From this perspective the concept of the 'common good' may prove to be a constructive alternative. The common good may be defined as 'constituted by goods that humans share intrinsically in common and that they communicate to each other, such as values, civic virtues and a sense of justice.'<sup>142</sup> It is 'a solidaristic association of persons that is more than the good of individuals in the aggregate'. It is the good of being a community – 'the good realized in the mutual relationships in and through which human beings achieve their well-being'.<sup>143</sup> The common good is therefore inherent to the relationships that exist among the members of a society tied together in a collective endeavour. Goods of this kind are therefore inherently common in their 'production' as well as in their benefits.<sup>144</sup> From this perspective, the notion of common good allows us to go beyond the limits of the concept of 'public good' in at least three ways:

1. The notion of common good goes beyond the instrumental concept of the public good in which human well-being is framed by individualistic socio-economic theory. From a 'common good' perspective, it is not only the 'good life' of individuals that matters, but also the goodness of the life that humans hold in common.<sup>145</sup> It cannot be a personal or parochial good.<sup>146</sup> It is important to emphasize that the recent shift from 'education' to 'learning' in international discourse signals a potential neglect of the collective dimensions and the purpose of education as a social endeavour. This is true both for the broader social outcomes expected of education, and for how educational opportunities are organized. The notion of education as a 'common good' reaffirms the collective dimension of education as a shared social endeavour (shared responsibility and commitment to solidarity).
2. What is meant by the common good can only be defined with regard to the diversity of contexts and conceptions of well-being and common life. Diverse communities will therefore have different understandings of the specific context of the common good.<sup>147</sup> Given the diverse cultural interpretations of what constitutes a common good, public policy needs to recognize and nurture this diversity of contexts, worldviews and knowledge systems, while respecting fundamental rights, if it is not to undermine human well-being.<sup>148</sup>
3. The concept emphasizes the *participatory* process, which is a common good in itself. The shared action is intrinsic, as well as instrumental, to the good itself, with benefits derived also in the course of shared action.<sup>149</sup> Education as a common good therefore necessitates an inclusive process of public policy formulation and implementation with due accountability. Placing common goods beyond the public or private dichotomy implies conceiving and aspiring towards new forms and institutions of participatory democracy. These would need to go beyond current policies of privatization without returning to traditional modes of public management.<sup>150</sup>

## Endnotes

- I37 Macpherson, Robertson and Walford, op.cit., p. 9.
- I38 Menashy, F. 2009. Education as a global public good: the applicability and implications of a framework. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 307-320.
- I39 Samuelson, P. A. 1954. The Pure Theory of Public Expenditure, *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 36, No. 4, pp. 387-389.
- I40 Adapted from Zhang, E. 2010. *Community, the Common Good, and Public Healthcare – Confucianism and its relevance to contemporary China*. Department of Religion and Philosophy, Hong Kong Baptist University.
- I41 Adapted from Marella, M.R. 2012. *Oltre il pubblico e il privato: per un diritto dei beni comuni*. Verona, Ombre Corte.
- I42 Deneulin, S., and Townsend, N. 2007. Public Goods, Global Public Goods and the Common Good. *International Journal of Social Economics*, Vol. 34 (1-2), pp. 19-36.
- I43 Cahill cited in: Deneulin and Townsend, ibid.
- I44 Adapted from: Deneulin and Townsend, ibid.
- I45 Deneulin and Townsend, ibid.
- I46 Holster, K. 2003. The Common Good and Public Education. *Educational Theory*, 53(3), 347-361.
- I47 Zhang, op.cit.
- I48 Deneulin, and Townsend, op.cit.
- I49 Adapted from Deneulin and Townsend, ibid.