

In this paper, I will be stratifying the three priorities articulated by the Global Education First Initiative (GEFI) through the human capital and human capabilities lenses. After doing so, I will look to the actual text of the initiative and hope to come to an understanding of the underlying theoretical frameworks that shape this initiative. In doing this, I hope to explore some potentially interesting areas of discourse and come to a greater conclusion about the ambitions of the initiative and potential areas for reform.

About the Global Education First Initiative

The Global Education First Initiative is an initiative started by the United Nations at the behest of General Secretary Ban Ki Moon. The five-year initiative was launched on September 2012 to, “accelerate progress towards the Education for All goals and the education-related Millennium Development Goals” (GEFI). This initiative has three main priorities: (1) put every child in school, (2) improve the quality of learning, and (3) foster global citizenship.

The initiative operates predominantly through background work; rather than providing immediate “feet on the ground” or direct funding, the initiative serves to encourage communication and what it describes as “catalyzing” work. The organization is partnered with many other UN organizations as well as various non-profits and political institutions. The initiative is composed of a Steering Committee that helps guide and direct its efforts. In addition UNESCO, the GEFI Secretariat, works to provide support to the organization. Most importantly, though, is the GEFI’s partnership with various “champion countries”. The GEFI works intimately with these different countries to encourage the promotion of the three priorities of the initiative. These countries are: *Andorra, Australia, Bangladesh, Benin, Brazil, China, Croatia, Denmark, Domini-*

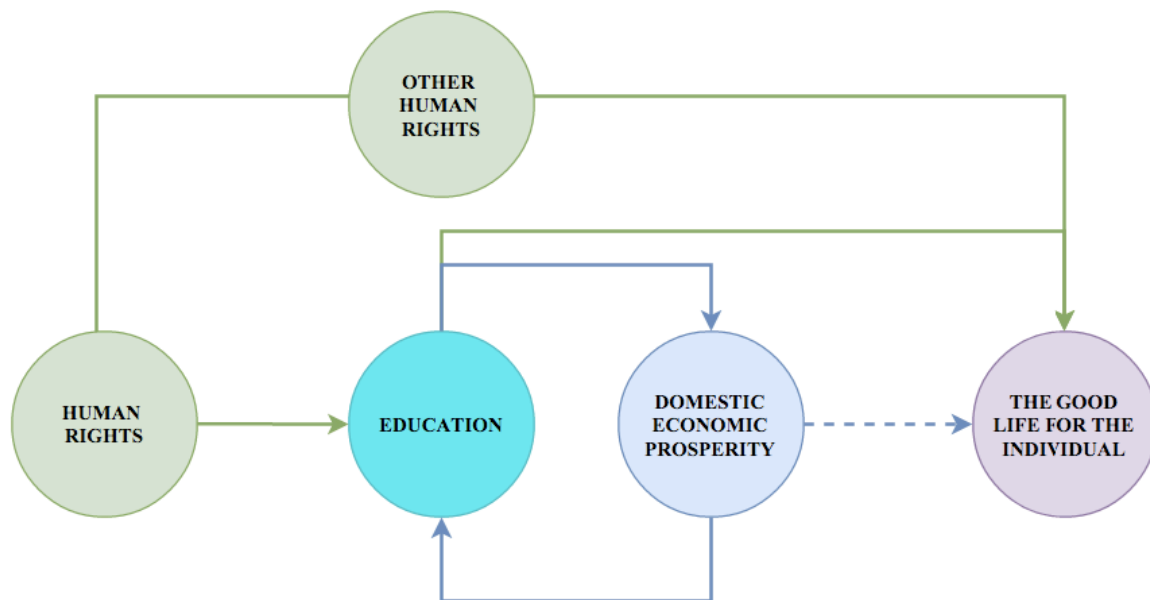
can Republic, Ethiopia, Guyana, Mozambique, Republic of Korea, South Africa, Tunisia, and United States of America.

Theoretical Background

Before moving onto the extensive analysis of the three priorities of the GEFI through the human capital and human capabilities approaches, it seems best to articulate some of the exact definitions and understandings posed by the two predominant theories.

The first and still, perhaps, one of the most prominent theories in international education development today is the theory of human capital. Human capital theory, first articulated by Theodore Schultz, argued for the addition to the definition of capital a form of capital centered around human ability to produce wealth. The concept of human capital is simple—governments could *invest* wealth into their education systems and this investment would ultimately produces returns, similar to other forms of investment. As an aside, it is of particular note to understand that investment occurs in education systems—this is primarily a consequence of the observation that, “differentials in earnings correspond closely to corresponding differentials in education...suggest[ing] that one is a consequence of the other” (29). At the core, human capital theory seeks to quantify the ability for humans to produce, seeing an investment in education as a *means* to improving the economy. A concern that Schultz expected in retaliation was primarily that, “to treat human beings as wealth...seems to reduce man to a mere material component, to something akin to property.” (26) Schultz argued, however, that, “by investing in themselves, people can enlarge the range of choice available to the them. It is one way free men can enhance their welfare” (26). Schultz, thus, chose to interpret this education as something natural and inherent to self-advancement; rather than something symptomatic of the objectification of man.

Human capital theory held prominence for a substantial period of time—beginning a shift away starting with Martha Nussbaum’s introduction human capability theory into the mainstream discourse. By contrast, rather than seeing education as a means to improving the economy, education could be seen as tool to improving the quality of life of humans. In her own words: “This approach espouses a principle of each person as an end. It stipulates that the goal is to produce capacities for each and every person, and not to use some people as a means to the capabilities of other or of the whole” (35). As she articulates, human capabilities approach works beyond the understanding that education is a means to end; rather it’s intimately embedded in producing the happiest people in the best societies. This can be seen in the model below.



The blue lines intend to display the connections of investment through human capital approach, where the green lines intend display the connections of investment through human capabilities. As the diagram intends to show about the human capital approach, investment in education increases in domestic economic prosperity, which then increases in investment in education. This is connected to the good life only indirectly as economic prosperity on behalf of a nation

does not guarantee a good life. The human capabilities model emphasizes an investment in human rights (but more articulately termed human capabilities) not only increases economic prosperity but it directly influences an individual's ability to pursue the good life, which is thought to be the ultimate goal of society.

As mentioned briefly above, Nussbaum articulated ten central capabilities required to enable people to “pursue a dignified and minimally flourishing life.” These capabilities are as follows: (1) life, (2) bodily health, (3) bodily integrity, (4) senses, imagination, and thought, (5) emotions (6) practical reason, (7) affiliation, (8) other species, (9) play, and (10) control over one's environment. By objective means, Nussbaum's ten capabilities without a doubt broaden the amount of considerations relevant to promoting a good life.

Priority 1—Put Every Child In School

The first priority involves putting every child in school. Guaranteeing every child within a country access to schooling is the furthest-reaching and most basic education-related guarantee that a country can make. When striving to improve education it is perhaps the first component that can and should be accomplished. However, in much of the Western world, primary school enrollment is not as substantial of a problem, particularly as it is a fundamental component in furthering education.

Before I proceed with the analysis of this priority, I believe it's important and entirely relevant to articulate a few ambiguities present in this priority. First, it isn't explicitly clear what level of enrollment is occurring—how much of education is being guaranteed? Primary? Secondary? This concern overlaps with the concern over the definition of “child” as in certain parts of the world an individual is no longer a child past the age of 13. Ultimately, the initiative

doesn't specify what level of education it aims to guarantee and to which groups. Moreover, the language "put" it's confusing and doesn't clarify what type of education will be guaranteed.

As has been articulated, the most central component to human capital theory is the use of education as means to improving the economy. With respect to this first priority, human capital theory would emphasize how an increase in school—particularly primary school—enrollment directly correlates to increases in economic stability and GDP. This economic motivation would be considered the prime motivation for investing in education.

By comparison, the human capabilities perspective would find many reasons for increasing school enrollment (consider life/control), but most prominently the sixth consideration of practical reason. As Nussbaum explains, practical reason emphasizes the importance of giving individuals the ability to develop themselves to "engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life." (34) A basic education provides social mobility through the provision of critical thinking skills. This expansion of understanding brings the individual into the modern world, providing them with the mindset to see their life as something incredibly significant.

Having established the differences between the two perspectives, let's analyze actual text used on the GEFI website for this first priority:

Education is a great driver of social, **economic** and political progress. As people learn to read, count and reason critically, their prospects for health and prosperity expand exponentially. But our advances in education have not benefited everyone equally—and primary school enrollment rates tell only part of the regrettable story. Millions of children who start primary school are unable to finish and still more miss out on secondary school. Today, some 69 million adolescents—in low-income countries—are receiving no post-primary education. **We can no longer afford the cost of excluding them.** (GEFI) ¹

¹ Note that the bolded text represents human capital rhetoric and the underlined text represents human capabilities rhetoric.

As you can see, there are clearly some understandings of each interpretation embedded in this introductory paragraph. The initiative emphasized both prospects for “health and prosperity” as well as the economic influence of excluding so many individuals from such basic forms of education.

Priority 2—Improve the Quality of Learning

The second priority involves improving the quality of learning of schools primarily because enrollment in education alone doesn’t guarantee upward mobility and the goals discussed in relation to the first priority. It is of absolute importance that, not only does society experience high enrollment in schools, but that those schools impart upon individuals significant and relevant knowledge. If the schools are ineffective, ultimately, enrollment in schooling has no real worth.

As I did in discussion of the first priority, I think it’s also important to acknowledge clear methodological problems with this priority. Above all, there is great cause to take issue with the ambiguity of the phrase “improving the quality”. This phrase really doesn’t specify focus areas for how the quality will be improved. Better teachers? Increased critical thinking? It’s not quite specific how this would be achieved. And while a degree of ambiguity is important for an organization looking to serve as a catalyst for change, it’s equally important for an organizations—especially those with as much influence and power as this one—to have a clearly articulated outlook on how they would go about improving the quality of education.

Looking at this second priority from a human capital perspective, improving the quality of the education serves to increase the return on investment. Hypothetically, were one to be enrolled in a low quality form of education, the ultimate return on investment would be marginal;

the transcendence necessary to move an individual into higher tiers of income generation requires high quality education. For instance, the difference in initial investment required to teach an individual how to work and an individual how to think is considerably small when considering the potential payoffs. Children are impressionable—if there would be any time to invest in an individual, it would be when they are still shaping their perspectives and outlooks on the world. Not crushing the capability to dream and achieve—that kind of empowerment—is absolutely critical for a developing nation to move into the higher echelons of development.

The human capabilities approach shares a very similar perspective with regard to increasing the quality of education. Where the human capital approach argues that good quality education at a young age produces individuals who are able to produce more and more efficiently, the human capabilities argues that high quality education reinforces understandings that aid in the development of complete people. These complete people are the closest conceptions to attaining what is considered the best or “good” life. Again, while this concept is intimately connected with some foundational capabilities, it inherently is directly connected with the sixth capability of practical reason. The better the education, the stronger the ability to reason and attain a fuller understanding of the life and the goals needed to pursue the best life.

With the understanding of the two interpretations, let's continue to the analysis of the GEFI's interpretation of the second priority. As they wrote:

School attendance should open pathways of learning and discovery, but too often it does not. Millions of children go through school and come out without basic literacy and numeracy skills. Education is ultimately judged by what people learn. Many students around the world are **banking** their futures on poorly trained, weakly motivated teachers without enough books and other basics to facilitate their learning. This is a **grave disservice not only to the students themselves but also to the parents who sacrifice to support them and the countries whose futures depend on them**. While we strive to boost school attendance, we must ensure that our schools are engines of opportunity and not just idle warehouses. (GEFI)

They too acknowledged how basic enrollment in education alone is not substantial enough to guarantee that the investment is well spent. The education needs to be high quality in order for it to be to truly maximize the payoff. Again, GEFI's interpretation of the second priority includes a mix of both human capital and human capabilities approaches. We see the human capital approach manifested through the countries' *dependence* on effective education practices and the human capabilities approach in the importance attributed to treating schools as an "engine[s] for opportunity".

Priority 3—Foster Global Citizenship

Whereas the first two priorities go hand-in-hand and seem to be rather broad goals, the third priority is rather specific by comparison, articulating the importance of creating a global community and fostering global citizenship. This third priority falls directly under the main goals and objectives of the United Nations—promoting intercommunication and dialogue with various other citizens of the world. Global citizenship is key to a peaceful future—as nations have begun increased communications and connection with each other, they've begun to work with each other on global issues. Promoting the value that individuals are not only citizens of their respective nations but of the world, provides reinforcement to the importance of engaging in peaceful dialogue with others.

Similar to the second priority, this priority suffers much of the same problems of ambiguity—what is global citizenship? How is it fostered? What encourages global citizenship? It's an ambiguity that, again, is important for an organization that works with so many different partners. Ultimately, this priority would benefit from increased articulation of what specific policy

measures they would *potentially* consider—if only to paint a clearer picture of what they actually do.

It is difficult to find a connection between how this priority could be justified from a human capital perspective. It offers no direct consequence to the local economies aside from piggy-backing on the fiscal benefits of increased trade. Instead, this priority seems to be based solely in the promotion of human capabilities. Inherently, the connection is intuitive—the understanding of capability and potential from human capabilities can be seen in how global citizenship attempts to promote a more positive and interconnected future. We can see this optimism of human potential. But more directly, this priority falls perfectly in line with the seventh consideration posed by Nussbaum of affiliation: “being able to live with and toward other, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another” (34).

The world faces global challenges, which require global solutions. These interconnected global challenges call for far-reaching changes in how we think and act for the dignity of fellow human beings. It is not enough for education to produce individuals who can read, write and count. Education must be transformative and bring shared values to life. It must cultivate an active care for the world and for those with whom we share it. Education must also be relevant in answering the big questions of the day. Technological solutions, political regulation or financial instruments alone cannot achieve sustainable development. It requires transforming the way people think and act. Education must fully assume its central role in helping people to forge more just, peaceful, tolerant and inclusive societies. It must give people the understanding, skills and values they need to cooperate in resolving the interconnected challenges of the 21st century. (GEFI)

As becomes quickly clear, this consideration completely embodies the first aspect of the capability of affiliation. Multiple times and in multiple ways the text put forward by the GEFI articulates the importance of “forg[ing] just, peaceful, tolerant and inclusive societies,” as well as key concepts of global solutions and human dignity.

Concluding Remarks

Every organization no matter how large, well-funded, or effective is liable to criticism. As was implied in the diagram earlier in this essay, human capabilities approach tends to accomplish and absorb the same goals of the human capital approach, if only indirectly. Conceptually, human capabilities approach is more effective than human capital because of its larger reach and ultimately more effective conceptualization. Though it might dilute the organizations mission, adding increased capabilities could extend the ultimate impact of the organization.

Additionally, though potentially minor, the methodological critiques of resolving some of the ambiguities in the definition are relevant to creating a more accurate impression of the organization, not only in the minds of those perusing the website, but also in those in a more official setting. Sharpening these definitions ultimately magnifies the impact of the organization and demonstrates that it's another throwaway project, but rather an organization with a clear and direct message bent on changing the world for the better.