

HIGHER EDUCATION AND POVERTY ERADICATION: A CASE STUDY OF IRANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Eradication of poverty or fight against poverty is one of the main slogans of many national and international institutes who claim defending humanitarian ideas, however their strategies seem to be quite disperse and disharmonic. It seems that one of the essential reasons which brings this dispersion and disharmony in their planning, as well as in their action plans, is different ways of conceptualizing poverty. This article begins with an ontological and genealogical review of the concept of poverty in its historical process. Next, the role of higher education in reducing different types of poverty will be analyzed. Iranian studies concerning original factors of poverty in Iranian society and suggestions to reduce this phenomenon compose another section of this article. This finally prepares the context for a comparative study of the process of higher education extension in Iran and its impacts on poverty, which does not exhibit a significant sign of reduction.

1 INTRODUCTION

In today's world, poverty eradication or fight against poverty constitutes one of the main slogans for the institutions which play an effective role in human life. These local or international institutions try diverse strategies to address this ominous phenomenon. It seems selection of different strategies and action plans is due to diverse conceptualization of "poverty" and also the attitude concerning different mechanisms which produce it. The purpose of this study is the clarification of the 'poverty' concept as well as verifying the impact of higher education on diminution or eradication of poverty.

2 THE IMPACT OF HIGHER EDUCATION ON POVERTY DIMINUTION

Although most of the studies concerning economic impact of higher education are based on dominant economic discourse and theories, and therefore their solutions are also aligned with this system, but there seems to be a unanimous agreement on the positive role of higher education on diminution of revenue poverty, or proportional poverty.

Theoretically, one can pursue the trace of studies and the impact of higher education in the "economics of the public sector" and "economics of human capital". Economists use two essential criteria, efficiency and equity, to evaluate the performance of the following main public policies:

- An efficient allocation of resources to produce goods and services in an economy;
- distribution equality of costs and benefits of economic activities;
- Stabilizing production, employment and price levels.

The concept of efficiency in public sector, particularly in higher education section, cannot be easily translated into decreasing cost of output or increasing faculties' workload and student-faculty ratios. As McMahon(1994) states: "Rather, the concept of economic efficiency is much broader. It is quite possible, for example for a university or a statewide higher education system to improve its economic efficiency by increasing its expenditures (i. e. expanding its budget) and simultaneously increasing its effectiveness in producing valued learning outcomes by a greater amount."

Equity, as a second criterion for evaluating policies, refers to the policy evaluation based on the effects of public policy on the fairness of the distribution of benefits and costs in the society. This kind of evaluation aims to understand whether public policy has generated a more just and equitable expected distribution of income. Equity, in our discussion, means what Baum (1996) defines as horizontal equity and vertical equity. Horizontal equity, in this perspective, refers to the situation in which individuals in similar circumstances benefit an equal chance in public expenditures and taxation policies. In the other word, individual in similar economic and social situations should face similar costs, benefits, facilities and resources. Vertical equity requires that individuals in dissimilar circumstance be treated in appropriately dissimilar ways when applying public expenditure and taxation policies. The reflection of these two principles can be shown in financial aids that some students receive from public sector. In sum, the relationship between economics of public sector and higher education can contribute to the social equity in long term, and can also reduce the rate of poverty. According to Paulsen (2001):

The economics of public sector is highly relevant to the study of the finance of higher education because the market for investment in higher education (Paulsen, chapter 3) and the market for enrolment places in college and universities or units of higher education are arenas in which federal, state, or local governments are actively involved. Furthermore, market failures, unjust distribution and merit goods are all characteristic of, and relevant for human capital and enrolment places in higher education.

2.1 Market Imperfections

What is justifying the intervention of public sector, or government as a representative of this sector, is market failure. Market failure refers to the situation where the market mechanisms are not able to reach an optimal and equitable allocation of resources. From economists' point of view, the main reasons that are generating market failures and therefore justify the government intervention are as follows:

- *Considering education as a public good, or at least, quasi-public good [due to its externalities];*
- *Investment in higher education occurs in the context of imperfect capital markets*
- *The equitable distribution of human capital in the market depends on the degree to which the current distribution of income is equitable;*
- *Society view generally higher education as a merit good.*

Ignoring above justifications in planning for higher education system, not to be based on scientific approach, can lead to unmethodical privatization of higher education, particularly in developing countries. The minimum impact of this kind of planning [only from economic point of view] will be the dominance of upper-classes in higher education system. Evidently, the consequences of such a process lead to the decrease of investment from low income classes and creation and continuation of the satanic cycle of poverty (Kazemi N. and Javdani H., 2007).

The approaches concerning economics of human capital confirm that investment in higher education sector is a kind of investment in "human capital" which can increase individuals' productivity and, therefore, generate economic profits which can help the societies for future development.

Therefore, in this view, the expenditures allocated to education and particularly to higher education can be considered as a participation in economic growth (woodhal, 2004:25).

The economic dimensions of these profits which are, usually, estimated by narrow models of social return, express a very high level of return, particularly in developing countries (World Bank, 1980:84) and could be considered, in one hand, as a more attractive investment compared to other alternative investments, and in the other hand, if this high rate of individual and social return coincides with an equal chance to access higher education it could, effectively and positively, influence social justice by diminishing revenue poverty.

2.2 The Role of Higher Education in Diminishing the "Digital Gap" or Poverty Reduction in a Knowledge Economy

This role could be even more pronounced in the current era which is sometimes referred to as "knowledge era", where knowledge as a good can generate the greatest value added. In fact, it seems in the new economy which is called "knowledge economy" access to knowledge and information are the main means through which we can reduce inequality, even proportional poverty, not only intra-

societies but also inter-societies. Therefore, according to this approach, one of the best choices for decreasing this gap is increasing the opportunity to access higher education, while respecting the two aforementioned principles: efficiency and equity.

The expanse of critical and affirmative literature in this area has been so vast that it has even influenced the policies and planning of international economic institutions.

Jamil Salmi, deputy general director for education in World Bank, in his article entitled "*Construction of knowledge society: new challenges for higher education (2003) [construction des sociétés du savoir: nouveau défis pour l'enseignement supérieur]*" indicating the new evolutions in the developing economic systems emphasizes the importance of higher education in this process and states:

L'enseignement supérieur a un impact direct sur la productivité nationale et détermine donc en grand partie les niveaux de vie et l'aptitude d'un pays à soutenir la concurrence mondiale. Les établissements d'enseignement supérieur mènent des stratégies de croissance fondées sur le savoir et participent à la réduction de la pauvreté (p.57).

Then, he stresses the advantages of knowledge and higher education as the most important engine for growth, information and communication revolution and also adds:

Ces mutations se traduisent tant par des opportunités que par des menaces. S'agissant des avantages, le rôle de l'enseignement supérieur dans la construction des économies du savoir et des sociétés démocratiques est plus déterminant que jamais. En effet, l'enseignement supérieur est essentiel, tout à la fois à la création de la capacité intellectuelle dont dépendent la production et utilisation du savoir et à la mise en œuvre des pratiques d'apprentissage tout au long de la vie nécessaire à l'actualisation des connaissances et des compétences individuelles (p.54).

In addition, in the World Bank reports, including its first general document about higher education entitled: "L'enseignement Supérieur: les Leçons de L'expérience" and also another document: "Social Capital: a Multidimensional Perspective" there is some essential indication which could be summarized as follows :

The reports point out how higher education contributes in improving a country's capacities and its association with global economy. These reports are also a review on higher education policy alternatives which can lead to improvement of economic situations and reducing the different types of poverty. These reports examine particularly the importance of higher education for economic and social development. Which strategies should be chosen by in-transition and developing countries to benefit the potential achievements of higher education? And finally, how World Bank and other development institutions could support these strategies?

3 METHODOLOGY

Multi-approaches and multi-methods methodology are used in this research. In the other word, in each part of this study suitable methodology has been used.

Documentary methodology is used in the first section which constitutes three theoretical domains: First, theories of economics of public sector and human capital; Second, the fundamental discussions about "knowledge society" as a new millennium phenomena and "digital gap" as a key variable which can produce and increase poverty in societies. And finally, fundamental concepts of the role of higher education in modern and industrial societies, as well as in knowledge and post-industrial societies.

Comparative statistical methodology constitutes another methodological approach of this research in two steps. In the first step, the process of the extension of higher education and the path of poverty was investigated to show whether the expansion of higher education has been able to reduce poverty and establish social justice in Iranian society. In the second step, comparative studies were done to examine whether the stock of human capital could increase the productivity of human resources as indicated by various theories.

The third methodological approach uses qualitative techniques of content analysis and meta-analysis. In facts these methodologies are used to analyze national researches.

The Iranian studies were analyzed in two levels: in the first level, by using content analysis technique, the studies concerning the roots and reasons of reproduction of poverty in Iranian society were analyzed. In the second level, using the same technique, some of related researches were analyzed focusing on frequency of research findings.

Finally, the conclusion was done by using meta-analysis of some theoretical and empirical findings which can highlight how Iranian higher education system could be effective in reducing poverty.

4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: IRANIAN RESEARCH CONCERNING POVERTY ORIGINS AND WAYS TO REDUCE IT

Using the theoretical findings, we will start by some related Iranian studies about the origins of poverty and its educational solutions which may reduce it. Then, using available data, the performance of higher education will be analyzed. It is important to mention that since some of the previous findings use different datasets and offer different findings, we will try to rely on official data and findings issued by official institutions as much as possible.

Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that the analysis done by some of these institutions, due to their sectional views and the dominance of economicisization, does not pay attention deeply to the roots. As a solution to this shortage, sometimes conceptual analysis will be inevitable to reach out beyond these findings.

4.1 The Origins of Poverty

The preliminary studies of Iranian Fourth Plan of Development, done by some government institutions and scholars, indicate the main factors which, in the past, have led to expansion of inequality and poverty. The following is a general outline:

- Under developing and the low rate of growth, due to the shortage of production motivation; Unjust distribution of income and wealth;
- Unemployment;
- The low rate of productivity
- The high rate of inflation
- Lack of theoretical approaches to find the origins of poverty and poverty eradication (Higher Research Institute of Social Insurance, 2002:10-18)

This ancient heritage that in the process of development has led to increase in poverty originates from the following factors:

- Structure of the dominant socio-economic power governing the international arena.
- Structure of Internal socio-economic power.
- Inability to create the necessary infrastructure to absorb and maintain specialists and experts who would be able to optimally execute policies.
- Following the proposed solutions by dominant institutions leading the global economy such as International Monetary Fund and World Bank.
- Incompetent and incoherent management systems.
- Lack of attention to aims and large scale strategies of constitution like social justice, poverty and inequality eradication and lack of concrete methods to address them.
- Lack of attention to other concepts of poverty such as poverty of liberty, poverty in gaining access to human rights, and poverty in development of human potentials.
- Ignoring the new achievements to identify the ways of preparation and empowerment of human resources.
- Lack of motivation in production (and entrepreneurship);
- And finally, organizational problem such as: lack of skilled human resources for empowering workforce, weakness in comprehensive and universal planning, Unavailability of local knowledge, multiplicity of organizations without any coordination (Higher Research Institute of Social Insurance, 2002:2-10).

Before concluding the above issues it seems to be more suitable to review the suggestions to resolve these problems. These suggestions could be classified in three areas: social gap ,capability poverty and revenue poverty:

- Reforming the power structure for the benefit of public sector by continuing political reforms and the expansion of social participation by transparency of relationships in power sphere, by reinforcement of citizenship rights, and by expansion of the possibility of public supervision.
- Coverage expansion of **general education**, public health, and accommodation, in other word, promoting quality of life by improving the index of **human development**.

Table 1 uses qualitative content analysis to classify the origins of poverty in Iran, based on institutional and performance variables. The third column was added to improve our analysis.

Table 1: qualitative content analysis of Iranian studies concerning the roots of poverty in Iran

Managerial performance weaknesses	Institutional –structural weaknesses	Theoretical weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managerial incompetency • Managerial incoherence • Inattention to the goals, large scale rules and strategies • Gap between plans and performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of suitable structure • Multiplicity of Parallel institutions • Inability to create the necessary infrastructure • Lack of transparency in power relations • Lack of possibility for public supervision • The high rate of inflation • Inability to absorb scholars 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to recognize the problems • Ignoring other poverty concepts • Political underdevelopment • Ignoring scientific approaches • Ignoring citizenship rights • Need to improve the Human Development Index

In Table 2 this classification was done by a different approach. The importance of this analytical approach comes from the title of the Fourth Development Plan: Knowledge-Based Development. Despite the emphasis of preliminary studies of the plan on “knowledge-baseness”, one can see the action plan still emphasizes on industrial-based development. These paradoxical approaches lead to non allocation of suitable budget to research and science which is one the essential factors that can pave the way for human resource empowerment.

Table 2: The Origins of Poverty in Iran and the Solutions Based on Development Planning

Poverty-creating issues	The origins of poverty in knowledge-based approach	solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to create infrastructure • Inability to absorb scholars • Managerial incompetency • Shortage of skilled human resources • Entrepreneurial weakness • Multiplicity of Parallel institutions • Irrelevant planning • Unclear advantages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient knowledge • Inattention to scientific findings • Shortage of new managerial and organizational knowledge • Shortage of local production knowledge • lack of information about exact situation of Iranian society • Imitative planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to up to date knowledge • Identifying the problems and using scientific approaches for their solutions • Evolution of education system • Free circulation of knowledge • Promoting critical thinking in students • Awareness about the role of education in development process • Promoting equal chance to access education • Decreasing the cost of factors which lead to improvement of human capacities

The precedent theoretical analyzes, the above tables and the data which will be presented can indicate the current situation of Iranian scientific system has not been able to meet the expectations in fight against poverty.

4.2 Conceptual Framework

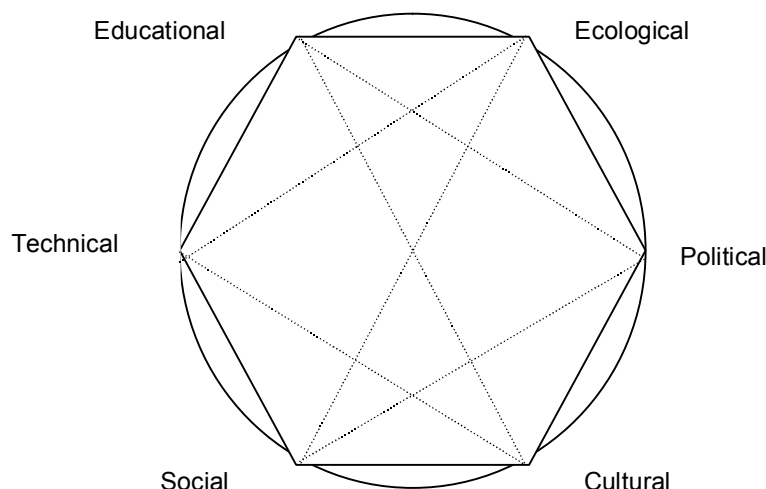
The following conceptual framework could be effective to investigate the performance of scientific system and identification of its malfunction. Lakshman Yapa (1996) presents a "nexus of poverty producer relations" Yapa states this six product nexus: technical, social, ecological, cultural, political, and educational play an important role in generating poverty.

What links this nexus to our study is the impact of educational relations on five other factors. In fact, educational relation translates into the impact of educational community on productive system and also the reciprocal effects. These relations play a key role in a country where there is powerful academic and research center networks, which relate the discourses and knowledge produced by them with technology and commercial operation used by productive activities.

Figure 1 shows clearly the complicated interaction between decisive relations in economic production with other productive activities; the nexus shows particularly the role of education because qualitative knowledge has originated from human, social, economical, juridical, and political knowledge to generate technical knowledge. In other word, one can conclude that the technical, social, ecological, cultural and political relations are determined by knowledge relations. Therefore, one can infer that the eventual strength or weakness in other relationships can be created by the institutions that generate knowledge.

This approach also allows us to leave out the existing perception which considers poverty as a result of capital shortage or inaccessibility to complicated technologies. Furthermore, this approach can channel our views to larger ideas, and point out that poverty is the result of the relation with other phenomena which lie beyond it. Therefore, the institutions that produce knowledge can play an important role in shaping and leading these other factors.

Figure 1 nexus of poverty producer relations



Source: Lakshman Yapa(1996) "*What Causes Poverty: A Postmodern View*", The Annuals Association of American Geographers, 86(4), 707; Cité par MaJid Rahnema.

One should not neglect that knowledge-generating institutions are also influenced by the reciprocal interaction with other institutions. In fact, this nexus could be a help to understand how discourses and individual activities participate to shape a special kind of power and knowledge in societies. This nexus helps us also to understand how some interactions which lead to creation and recombination of new relations and new shapes of Knowledge and power that can be used by adjusting and normalizing systems.

Now, comparative investigation between data and research findings could be done by using this conceptual framework.

As Table 3 suggests the rate of growth of enrolment, student and alumnus are 132%, 98% and 532% respectively.

Therefore, based on theoretical concepts of public sector and economics of human resources, It is expected that this high rate of growth in one decade, particularly for alumnus that are potential skilled workforces in Iranian society, has a significant positive effect on productivity, and reduce the rate of poverty. The poverty index, however, in the same period, do not exhibit any significant sign of improvement.

Other research findings also confirm these results in Iran (assadzadeh & Satya, 2001; Organization for Planning and budgeting, 2002; Higher Research Institute of Social Insurance, 2002).

Table 3: Statistical Evolution of Enrolments, Students and Alumnus (1996 -2006)

Year	Gender	Alumnus			Students			Enrolments		
		Free	With tuition	Sum	Free	With tuition	Sum	Free	With tuition	Sum
1996	Female	19181	7757	26938*	100964	108199	209163*	37806	29650	67456*
	Male	45952	10495	56447*	256836	120073	376909*	67717	22883	90600*
	Sum	65133	83514*	148647	357800	849108*	1206908	105523	201278*	306801
2006	Female	51430	126779	178209	225382	1011240	1236622	57130	333176	390306
	Male	61884	116956	178840	261323	900866	1162189	64697	257174	321871
	Sum	112314	244735	357049	486705	1912106	2398811	121827	590890	712717

Source: statistical of Iranian higher education (2006), Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education

* Azad university data's are not available

Table 4, Iranian urban poverty index (1994-2004)

year	P0	P1	P2
1994	0.291	0.083	0.038
1995	0.355	0.114	0.051
1996	0.322	0.101	0.045
1997	0.312	0.096	0.042
1998	0.348	0.111	0.050
1999	0.240	0.070	0.030
2000	0.307	0.097	0.043
2001	0.192	0.052	0.021
2002	0.251	0.073	0.031
2003	0.283	0.082	0.034
2004	0.294	0.084	0.035

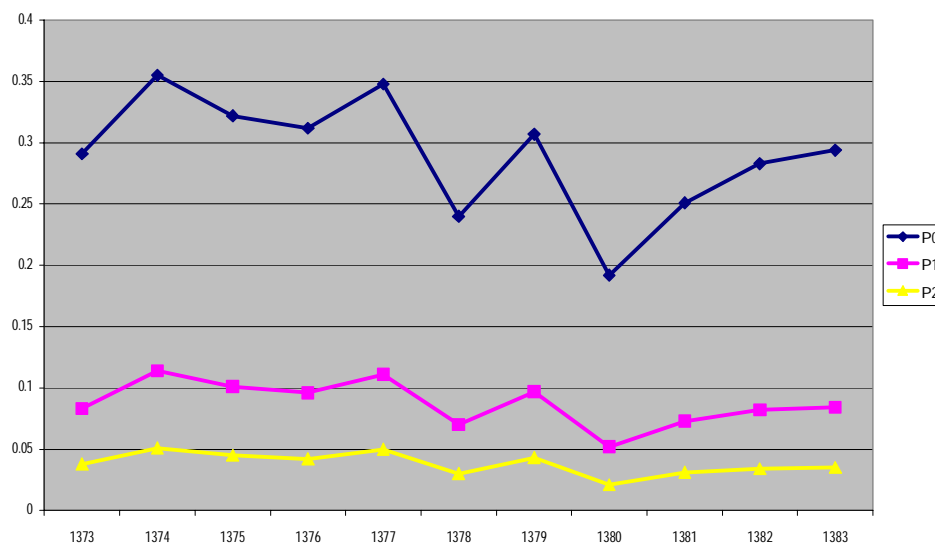
Source: Ebrahimi, Zahra (2005) *Measuring Poverty in Iran*, Alzahra University

4.3 Human capital and productivity as an outcome of higher education

We start this section with two questions: is it possible to conclude that the small role of human and social capital in Iranian society, as evidence on performance, quality and consistency of its higher education system, has caused the reduction in production, wealth and consequently increase in poverty? Isn't it correct to state that increase in social and human capital only occurs when the higher education system has the necessary potentials to generate and accumulate these capitals?

The response to these questions could be positive by paying attention to the theoretical concepts, empirical findings, and also to the concept of productivity as the ratio of output to each one of factors of production (labor, capital and management) or the "degree of efficient utilization" of factors of production. Among the factors of production, manpower, and then, human capital which are normally produced by education system and lead to endogenous evolution of scientific-technical knowledge, play the most important role. Without focusing on all issues which internalize scientific-technical knowledge, one cannot get a clear and deep understanding of the concept of productivity (Iranian National Productivity Organization, 2002:13).

Figure 2: Urban Poverty Index



Viewing productivity in this manner, and following it by a comparative study of the combination of wealth in Iran and some other countries, one can argue that a big part of human resource poverty in Iran is due to the malfunction of its educational ,or to be more precise, higher education system .

Table 6: Combination of Wealth Production, an Inter-country comparison

	Per capita wealth estimation	Human resource share	Physical wealth share	Natural wealth share
Per capita global average	86000	%64	%16	%20
Japan	565000	%80	%18	%3
Germany	299000	%79	%17	%4
Spain	268000	%78	%12	%10
Turkey	34000	%72	%15	%13
Iran	28000	%34	%37	%29

Source: World Bank, 1996, cited by Iranian Productivity Organization

Table 7: Combination of wealth production, An Inter-Country group Comparison

Group	Total global wealth percent	human	physic	Natural
63 first material exporter countries	%4.6	%36	%20	%44
100 developing countries	%15.9	%56	%16	%28
	%79.6	%67	%16	%17

Source: World Bank, 1996, cited by Iranian National Productivity Organization

Tables 6 and 7 suggest two essential points about the situation of human capital in Iran: the first point is that human resource in Iran has the minimum share in wealth production, comparing with other four countries, and it is also so far from the global average. The second point indicates that this situation has occurred despite the significantly high share of physic wealth (two times more than per capita global average), and natural wealth which is 50% higher compared to global average.

Moreover, comparing Iranian wealth situation with countries like Japan, with its natural wealth ten times less and its physical wealth 2 times less than Iran, suggest that production of wealth has a direct relationship with capability and capacity of human resources who are mostly products of educational ,or preferably, higher education system.

Looking at table 8 also reveals that Iranian National Productivity Index is the lowest one, comparing with 14 others countries, which could be another indicator of unsuccessful performance of Iranian higher education system, due, essentially, to its irregular and irrelevant expansion. In other word, it seems that Iranian higher education system which is supposed to increase human capital has been unable to deliver the expected output. Therefore, this inability of Iranian graduated and skilled manpower in wealth production is among the reasons which show inefficacy of Iranian higher education in fight against poverty.

Table No.8: National Productivity Index

No.	country	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
1	china	100	108/68	115/97	123/23	129/48	136/69	142/67	149/72	156/04	163/56
2	Fiji	100	95/95	98/53	97/76	100/37	98/04	100/05	99/9	103/29	—
3	Hong-Kong	100	110/43	117/04	120/48	135/04	129/46	138/07	142/37	144/93	149
4	India	100	103/92	104/68	116/16	120/27	137/71	118/91	123/73	125/14	130/53
5	Indonesia	100	101/85	104/59	113/23	118/27	127/49	123/85	140/97	149/89	—
6	Iran	100	98/49	87/93	87/68	95/05	101/81	103/69	104/71	103/47	103
7	Japan	199	103/98	108/55	114/51	118/6	130/8	120/87	119/84	120/83	122/67
8	South Korea	100	105/73	114/06	116/56	133/61	121/45	135/55	140/67	148/7	157/79
9	Malaysia	100	100/51	106/09	118/81	117/35	123/54	129/33	134/43	142/57	153/07
10	Nepal	100	101/31	107/53	112/53	117/19	123/82	138/59	131/83	141/19	144/19
11	Pakistan	100	99/64	105/01	106/56	108/37	118/11	133/31	120/85	132/58	124/84
12	Philippine	100	103/31	106/69	111/47	111/29	108/58	104/37	104/6	106/08	109/02
13	Singapore	100	105/24	111/66	117/07	119/66	124/83	128/34	140/19	149/08	157/37
14	Srilanka	100	—	—	—	106/74	119/85	137/13	133/36	126/50	147/33
15	Thailand	100	105/53	113/86	135/11	126/58	146/74	153/19	161/56	181/09	—

Source: Iranian National Productivity Organization, 2002:13-29

5 CONCLUSION

As scholars believe, educational system as the key generator of capable human resources, if meets the necessary qualities and conditions, could be an efficient tool in reducing poverty. The role of institutions that are producing and spreading knowledge in the society becomes more importance when we realize that these institutions, by improving social and human capital, are able to have long term and sustainable positive impacts on poverty reduction.

Nonetheless, we should keep in mind that the outputs and the impacts of higher education system will lead to desirable outcome only when they meet the two main principles of efficiency and equity.

Aside from theoretical backgrounds and global experiences supporting the effectiveness of higher education systems in societies' process of development and poverty reduction, which can lead to a better social justice situation, Iranian pathological studies about economic, social, and cultural situation of Iran also indicate that underdevelopment situation which Iran suffers from is due to underdevelopment of its knowledge-generator institutions. Therefore, it seems that one the best solution, although not the only one, which can help Iran to recover from this situation, is to adopt a developed and effective higher education system.

As the final note, considering the increasing and sometimes stagnated poverty trend in Iran suggested by the data, one can conclude that there is a divergence between poverty trend and the irregular expansion of higher education system in Iran. Therefore, continuing the same path and following the same higher education policies and strategies in not only ineffective for Iranian society, but could also be considered as a threat to its future.

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