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### **Low Hanging Fruits: When Governments Look for Easy Wins & Ignore Real Priorities**

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This is an author's draft of an article published in the PA Times.

The final version, the version of record, is available online at:

<https://patimes.org/low-hanging-fruits-when-governments-look-for-easy-wins-ignore-real-priorities/>



## Low Hanging Fruits: When Governments Look for Easy Wins & Ignore Real Priorities

When governments and top-level political leaders are deciding on national priorities, there is always this concern that they need to appease the citizens, and appease them quick. They prioritize investments in sectors that show quick returns and are more tangible and visible to citizens. They may either choose to go for *low hanging fruits*, when available, or they may come up with *populist policies*. Whatever the option they choose, they should not do so at the expense of real priorities that may have their positive impact materialize in the distant future.

The phrase 'low hanging fruits', is used to refer to quick wins that are easy to implement by government, and that will be appreciated right away by the benefiting citizens. Many development experts recommend it as a strategy to government. There is a need to capitalize on low hanging fruits. This may be interpreted as a strategy of focusing on sectors where countries have a comparative advantage and therefore the gains realized will be quick. It is knowing how best to use available resources and implement interventions that are most feasible, technically, politically and administratively, and will likely have the greatest positive impact. On the other hand, not everyone agrees that the results attained by picking the low hanging fruit will be the most beneficial. Some say that these wins may be quick and easy, but mostly inconsequential. A title of a peer reviewed article by Yanarella & Levine in 2008 clearly stated this: "Don't Pick the Low-Hanging Fruit! Counterintuitive Policy Advice for Achieving Sustainability".

Populist policies on the other hand are those that help a political leader gain more supporters, regardless of the real value of those policies. Populist leaders convince their citizens that they are the only ones working to serve them and protect them against all sorts of internal and external threats.

Having said that, it is important to remember that long term investments crucially significant to the development of any nation involve developing its human capital, and particularly its education and health sectors. However, governments in many developing countries opt out of real investments in either, and prefer more tangible investments with quicker returns to show, and for which they can take credit. Over and over again we get to hear of X and Y countries investing in building the tallest skyscraper in the region, the biggest fun park and/or the largest worship temple.

On checking World Bank data related to different governments expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, we found huge discrepancy between developed and developing countries. Egypt for example is noted as under spending with 2.5 percent of GDP directed to education in 2020, compared to the United States 4.9 percent, Canada 5.2 percent, South Africa 6.2 percent and Finland 6.3 percent. Similarly, the most recent World Bank data related to expenditures on the health sector as a percentage of GDP showed that Egypt spent 4.74 percent of GDP in 2019, compared to Japan 10.74 percent, France 11.06 percent, Switzerland 11.29 percent and the United States 16.77 percent.

Recently, the Prime Minister of Egypt called upon both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health to identify a number of schools and hospitals where the private sector can 'come in' and hold a share. "The health, education and higher education ministries will come up with a list of state-owned schools, universities and hospitals that could be offered to private investors", said the Prime Minister.

We are already underspending on health and education. Do we need to reduce the size of the pie even further? Egypt is not meeting its constitutional commitments in regard to health and education investments as a percentage of GDP. The Egyptian government has come up with creative ways to

generate profits by investing in building international schools through the special fund established for that purpose in cooperation with the private sector.

Young parents in Egypt are suffering from low quality of education in public schools and the very high cost of tuition asked by private schools. Making ends meet is becoming more difficult for young couples who want to offer their children a good quality education, and choose private schooling over the public schooling. A number of deep changes are taking place in the Egyptian society as a result. Some of the privately schooled children end up being culturally alienated, speak very poor Arabic and know very little about their culture and history. Anecdotal evidence show that young ambitious people are resigning from the once perceived prestigious jobs in public universities, teaching hospitals and from the judiciary. They are finding it impossible to make ends meet. Many young people are choosing to migrate to other developed countries, like Canada for example, where school education is still free for all and of a higher quality.

I think it is a good thing that governments are trying to make quick wins and capitalize on easily accessible and feasible opportunities that are guaranteed to give quick returns, but this should not be at the cost of ignoring other core long-term priorities, such as health and education.