



## The future of education must drop techno-solutionism: Insights from the cases of Cambodia and the Philippines

Jean Linis-Dinco\*

**Abstract:** Technology is a tool and must not be seen as an end in itself but as a means to facilitate broader educational and social objectives. Technology’s celebrated integration into education often masks deep inequalities and the profit-driven ties between the state and capital.

In the evolving landscape of global education, many governments have jumped into the bandwagon of incorporating technology in the student’s learning environment. With this, educational technology (EdTech) providers have gone as far as to hype up their products and describe them as [revolutionary](#). Indeed, there is no doubt that some technological innovations such as collaborative learning tools and distance learning have [opened doors](#) for historically marginalised groups. Yet, describing such an integration as revolutionary is nothing more than a marketing and public relations terminology. If anything, it has only been

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\* Jean Linis-Dinco holds a PhD in Cybersecurity (2023) from the University of New South Wales-Canberra, and a Master’s in Human Rights and Democratisation in Asia Pacific ([APMA](#)) (2017) from Mahidol University, Thailand. She is a member of the ASEAN Regional Coalition to #StopDigitalDictatorship. She is one of the policy analysts of the [6th edition](#) and [Global Campus Policy Observatory](#)

[revolutionary](#) for the financial relationships between the state and the capital, highlighting the relentless drive for profit rather than a genuine educational revolution.

In 2023, [UNESCO argued](#) that while technology has provided lifelines to millions, it simultaneously excludes a significant number of students due to unequal access. This disparity is more pronounced in regions ravaged by conflict and poverty, marked by limited Internet connectivity and lack of fundamental infrastructures to even meet basic needs. Here, we see that the issue of digital divide is less of a technical issue but more of a [socio-political one](#), which implicates a host of human rights obligations that are enshrined in international treaties and declarations.

This issue is particularly evident in the Philippines, where [private schools](#) students have significant advantage over their public schools counterparts due to better funding and resources. Whilst there are government's efforts to integrate technology in education through projects like the [Last Mile Schools](#) programme aimed at enhancing access in remote areas, the digital divide remains pronounced. About 2.8 million students lack access to online connectivity, with a disproportionate number of students residing in rural regions of the Philippines, as highlighted by [Santos in a study](#).

For many [developing countries](#), the cost of digital devices and the Internet is prohibitively high for a large portion of the population, particularly in rural areas and amongst marginalised communities. This economic barrier does more than widen the gap between the rich and the working class. In fact, it strikes at the very heart of educational equity that undermines the principles laid out in [Article 28](#) and [Article 29](#) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as well as [Article 13](#) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and [Article 5](#) of the International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). There is no denying that the disparity in access to digital resources and educational opportunities help perpetuate cycles of poverty and limit socio-economic mobility, contravening [Article 26](#) of the UDHR and Article 13 of the ICESCR, which emphasise that education should be directed to the 'full development of the human personality' and to 'the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms'.

In regions where technology is inaccessible, these broader educational goals become difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Take Cambodia, for example, only 23 percent of students have access to an ICT device and stable Internet connection, as highlighted by the [Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport](#) in 2021. The lack of digital access prevents students from engaging with digital learning resources that could enhance their educational outcomes. This situation is a glaring example of how educational inequalities are compounded by technological disparities which then forms a barrier that is both economic and informational. Without the tools to access digital education, the majority of the students in Cambodia are excluded from the vast repository of knowledge and learning opportunities that the internet represents.

This has far-reaching repercussions that can affect a person's social mobility and future opportunities. The lack of such access is a denial of the right to participate in the cultural and economic life of a globalised world. Highly contrary to [Goal 4](#) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which calls for 'inclusive and equitable quality education' and which promotes lifelong opportunities for all.

Technological exclusion intersects with other forms of discrimination which impacts the most [vulnerable populations](#), including the working class women, queer, rural communities, and Indigenous people and ethnic minorities. This inequality starkly exposes the fallacy of technology as a [universal equaliser](#), revealing that its grand promise of technology as a democratising force in education crumbles under the weight of a [harsh reality](#). Digital resources are [disproportionately distributed](#). And in return, [technology](#) favours the already affluent and further marginalises the disadvantaged. The [transformative](#) potential of technology in global education is stifled not by a lack of innovation, but by deep-rooted [systemic disparities](#) that obstruct access for the most vulnerable. No matter how much technology you put in a system that is already crumbling into pieces, it will not stabilise the structure.

A prevalent approach observed in the Philippines, as detailed in the studies by [Jimenez and Sawada](#), and in Cambodia, as noted by [Brehm](#), involves a significant reliance on the private sector to address social issues within education policy. This strategy certainly boosts the figures, driving growth for investors and various other stakeholders involved. Yet often overlooked is the fact that engagements with the private sector come with strings attached, whether it's the expectation of high returns on investment, tax breaks for the investors or other favourable conditions that tilt the balance towards their interests. Reliance on private investment to solve public educational deficiencies create dependencies that does not align with the [long-term educational goals](#) of these countries.

A radical human rights approach to this chaos would focus on two 'D': degrowth and de-commodification. Applying the concept of degrowth to digital access and education means focusing on the efficient use of existing technologies and infrastructure to extend educational opportunities without necessarily increasing production or consumption. Basically, it means less is more. We need to ensure that technology serves as a tool for inclusive education rather than an end in itself.

As for de-commodification, we need to remove essential services like education and internet access from the [grip of market forces](#). This means education should not be viewed as a business, but a [fundamental human right](#). Education should not be subjected to the whims of the economy or the person's ability to pay but should be guaranteed for all as a [public good](#). There should be significant investment in public infrastructure, especially in technology and connectivity, funded by progressive taxation that ensures the wealthiest individuals and corporations contribute their fair share towards building an equitable society.

The transition to a system based on degrowth and de-commodification requires a critical examination of the entrenched relationship between the [state and capital](#). What we need is a cultural shift towards valuing sustainability, equity, and community engagement over neoliberal framework of individualism and competition. And it starts by acknowledging the fact that technology is not the be-all-end-all solution to a social problem that ‘tech-bros’ want you to believe. This kind of mentality turns students into consumers and schools and universities [into marketplaces](#), which distorts the primary aim of education as a tool for societal enhancement and equity. This complex interplay between the state and capital, where governments frequently rely on the private sector to address societal issues, reveals a significant shift in how public responsibilities are managed. The reliance on private entities to solve problems that are traditionally within the purview of public institutions can blur the lines between public good and private gain. In turn, it creates conflicts of interest and prioritises profitability over accessibility and equity.

It is clear that addressing the educational digital divide requires nuanced and strategic interventions. I call for a communal move beyond [techno-solutionism](#). It is more important now than ever for the working class to advocate for tackling underlying issues through comprehensive whole-of-economy changes. In this regard, in the Philippines, educational spending is [critically low](#), with funding per student significantly below international standards, exacerbating challenges in integrating technology effectively. Revising the [Enhanced Basic Education Act](#) of 2013 is a first step. And this revision should not only aim to increase the financial allocation to education but also to ensure that these funds are distributed equitably and prioritise schools that serve marginalised communities and regions where the digital divide is most acute.

As for Cambodia, it faces [similar challenges](#), compounded by [underfunding](#) and a lack of professional development for teachers in digital competencies. The [Education Law](#) of 2007 should encapsulate a detailed plan for the distribution of resources that transcends urban-centric models of development, ensuring that rural and marginalised areas receive the attention and investment they critically need. It should also address the broader socio-economic barriers that students face. Issues such as electricity access, internet connectivity, housing stability and healthcare impact students' ability to utilise technological tools for learning.

To genuinely dismantle the structures perpetuating the educational digital divide, we must go beyond surface-level policy changes and confront the capitalist dynamics that prioritise profit over the public good. True transformation requires a radical reimagining of education as a site of class struggle and collective emancipation. Only through a radical reimagining of education as a site of class struggle and emancipation can we ensure that technology serves as a revolutionary tool for levelling social inequities and empowering the most marginalised.