The standard of textbook provision deteriorated during the 1970s and 1980s throughout Africa and much of Latin America and Asia, and in 1990 was far below the desirable ratio of one book per pupil. Supplementary reading and other learning materials were even scarcer, and quality was often poor. During the 1990s the situation improved in some countries, thanks in large measure to external funding by international agencies, governments, and CSOs, but globally textbooks continued in short supply. Textbooks were particularly scarce in rural areas, and even where available were not always used effectively. State dominance in textbook provision proved inefficient and uneconomic. Supply of learning materials was impeded by lack of funding, conflicting government priorities, difficulties in distribution, and lack of trained personnel. The provision of textbooks in many countries still depended on cyclical infusions of external aid that concentrated on production of a commodity without building the related infrastructures.

Three significant trends can be detected in textbook provision during the 1990s: decentralization of selection and procurement, economic liberalization with a greater role for the private sector, and increased cost recovery to achieve systemic sustainability. Funding agencies sought to coordinate their activities and increasingly recognized the importance of developing a national publishing industry to produce textbooks that would be in steady supply and would reflect local conditions, experiences, and needs. In the latter part of the decade the focus of aid began to shift from supply-side provision of textbook producers to targeted subsidies and demand-side funding of users.

A sustainable and competitive system of providing textbooks and other learning materials requires a publishing industry that can originate, produce, and deliver the materials along commercial principles of cost recovery. Inequities will result, which can be reduced through targeted subsidies and programs of demand-side support. But textbooks are only part of the picture. Provision of the wide range of other books needed to foster and maintain a literate society is also contingent on the emergence of a viable publishing and bookselling industry. This goal will be beyond the capacity of many small and poor countries. Dependence on external assistance will continue, although it can be reduced through national policies of cost recovery and increased educational budgets. Electronic options, in the near- and mid-term are unaffordable and impracticable for many regions of the world, where the problem of inequitable access to appropriate, low cost reading material must still be addressed.