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FROM PROJECTS TO SWAPS: AN EVALUATION OF BRITISH AID TO PRIMARY SCHOOLING 1988-2001

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This evaluation focuses on UK-funded education projects and programmes in six countries (Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Ghana, Kenya, and Malawi), which accounted for approximately 60% of total UK education aid in the late 1990s. British policy and practice regarding aid to education have changed in two main ways since the late 1980s: firstly, a marked shift in the balance of expenditures towards strengthening primary schooling; and secondly, a move away from providing support through fairly small, free-standing projects designed to provide one or two key inputs, towards much broader, more integrated projects, intended to support major parts of the primary schooling system. Since the late 1990s, the sector-wide approach (SWAP) has become the preferred channel for supporting primary education.

SUPPORT FOR PRIMARY EDUCATION

The policy objectives of British aid to education have changed markedly over the past 30 years. During the 1970s and 1980s, the dominant aim was to meet national manpower needs. From the late 1980s onwards, however, ODA¹ policy began to highlight the importance of education for economic and social development. To maximise social and economic benefits, increasing emphasis was placed on the lower levels of the education system. Projects were the main vehicle of aid delivery.

In 1997, internationally agreed development targets became the main goals of British development assistance. In the education sector, these targets are *universal primary education provision by 2015 and the elimination of gender inequalities in primary and secondary education by 2005*. DFID's contribution towards achieving these targets is now channelled chiefly through sector support programmes.

UK FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION

Fluctuating support British education aid fell by around 30 per cent in real terms between

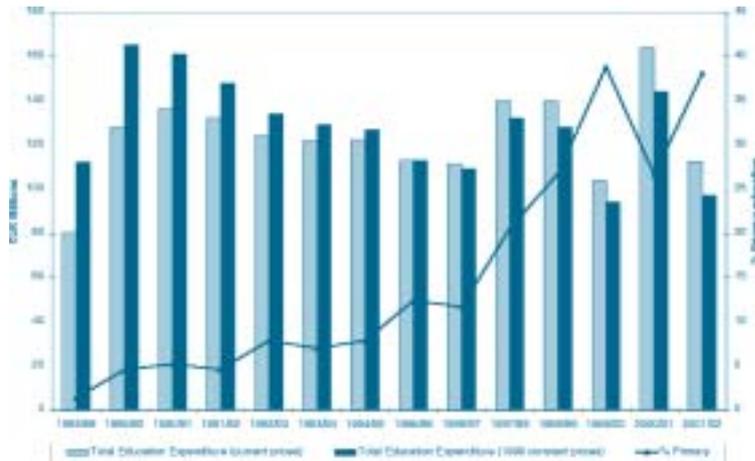
1990 and 1996. Although this decline has been reversed since then, the overall level of UK assistance to the education sector in 2000/01 was only slightly higher (in real terms) than in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 2000/01, education aid accounted for 9% of total DFID bilateral aid commitments. This is surprisingly low given the overall importance of education among the Millennium Development Goals.

Dramatic increase in support for primary education DFID support for primary schooling increased dramatically from about 1.4% in 1988/89 to around 38% of total education expenditure in 2001/02. The large increase in primary education expenditure, since 1997, has been in line with the Denver commitment to increase bilateral support to basic education in Africa by 50%.

A strong poverty focus British educational aid tends to support poorer and more disadvantaged States and peoples. More than 90% of DFID's educational assistance is directed to 20 countries with lower incomes per head and a lower HDI than other countries receiving DFID support for education.

¹ Until 1997, when the Department for International Development (DFID) was created, British official development assistance was managed by the Overseas Development Administration (ODA)

UK aid to education 1988/89 – 2001/02



FREE STANDING, NARROW FOCUS PROJECTS

Prior to 1993, British aid to the education sector was mainly based on relatively small, narrowly focused projects with a strong emphasis upon teacher training and a heavy dependence upon British expatriate advisers. Given the narrow focus and limited resourcing of these projects, their overall objectives tended to be unrealistic, and their impact limited.

Design and appraisal A 'blueprint' approach to project design and centralised 'top down' implementation resulted in generally low levels of ownership and participation by government and other key national stakeholders. Project objectives were poorly specified and often lacked meaningful or clearly quantified indicators of achievement. Risk assessments were also superficial and based on over-optimistic assumptions. Specific weaknesses included:

- Heavy reliance on imported education innovations, in particular active learning methods, cascade training of teachers, and teacher advisory centres for INSET – but with little or no hard evidence concerning their effectiveness in developing countries. In the absence of adequate research and evaluation, the justifications for introducing these major new innovations were based too much on professional intuition.
- Educationalists were almost entirely responsible for project formulation, with only limited involvement of specialists from other disciplines. Consequently, understanding of the wider social and economic context in which primary schools functioned tended to

be limited. These projects focused heavily on the supply side and gave insufficient attention to the social, economic, political and cultural factors determining demand for primary education at household, community and national levels.

- Inadequate arrangements for systematic monitoring and evaluation of project outputs and impacts made it impossible to assess project impacts in schools and in the wider community.

Impact and sustainability The impact of these projects was generally limited because of the level and quality of project outputs and the lack of sustainability. The political and management challenges involved in 'going to scale' were not anticipated and often resulted in poor project performance.

With respect to teacher development, the widespread reliance on cascade training models enabled relatively large numbers of trainers and teachers to benefit from in-service workshops and other activities. However, the quality of this training at all levels of the cascade was generally poor.

Many projects supported the development of networks of teacher advisory centres. However, a number of factors prevented these centres from functioning properly. In particular, they were sited too far from most teachers working at rural schools, supporting teaching materials were often unavailable, and attrition rates among centre trainers were often very high, mainly because of poor salaries and working conditions.

THE SHIFT TO LARGE, MULTI-OBJECTIVE PROJECTS

...unless these large, multi-objective projects are part of a comprehensive strategy for primary education, it is likely that systemic constraints of various kinds will undermine implementation and the attainment of key objectives. Interestingly, therefore, DFID support for primary education is becoming increasingly polarised around SWAPs, on the one hand, and narrow-focus projects, on the other.

By 1994, the policy focus had shifted to support for primary schooling. Education projects for the first time focused exclusively upon the primary education system, and were broadened in scope to cover a wide range of inputs and activities necessary to achieve sustainable improvement in primary schooling. This more holistic, integrated and interdisciplinary approach:

- linked teacher training with provision of textbooks, improvement of curricula, community participation, and alternative education.
- paid more attention to the school environment and the broader social, economic, political and cultural factors influencing the overall demand for education.
- focused more on field-level consultation and the development of management systems and institutional capacity at central and local levels.

Mainstreaming of gender and poverty reduction goals From the early 1990s, greater efforts were made to ensure that gender equity and poverty reduction are adequately addressed. Project identification, appraisal and design teams were increasingly multi-disciplinary. However, diagnoses of causes of gender bias and exclusion often remained superficial, leading to inadequate responses.

Greater emphasis on stakeholder involvement There was much greater recognition of the need for high levels of stakeholder participation and ownership in the planning and management of interventions. But increasing the involvement of communities and other stakeholders in primary education has proved to be much more difficult than expected.

Project outcomes and impacts The overall performance of this new type of project has been quite variable. Three of the seven projects reviewed appear to be largely successful; three others showed very mixed performance; and one project largely failed. In all countries, the scale and complexity of the task in achieving sizeable and sustained improvements in effective learning in primary schools, especially among disadvantaged groups of previously excluded children, was seriously under-estimated at the project design stage.

Monitoring and evaluation Reliable evidence of impact on learning outcomes was missing from almost all the reviewed projects. Consequently, project evaluations rely on mainly impressionistic and anecdotal information. Comprehensive impact assessments undertaken two or three years after project completion by impartial external evaluators, drawing on good quality baseline information, are rare.

A key lesson: systemic reform is necessary In different ways, at least half of these large, multi-objective projects have had serious implementation problems. A key lesson is therefore that, unless these projects are part of a comprehensive strategy for primary education, it is likely that systemic constraints of various kinds will undermine implementation and the attainment of key objectives.

In the light of this experience, in countries where systemic reform through the adoption of a sector-wide approach (SWAPs) is still not possible, DFID is refocusing its support for primary education on specific constraints using the focused, free standing project mode. Interestingly, therefore, DFID support for primary education is becoming increasingly polarised around SWAPs, on the one hand, and narrow-focus projects, on the other.

THE EMERGENCE OF SWAPs

The key change in the design of British educational aid interventions since the mid-late 1990s has been the shift towards providing broad financial aid to the sector as a whole. DFID's experience with education SWAPs during the last five years highlights both the very considerable payoffs that can, under the right conditions, be achieved with this approach - as well as the major challenges that this approach poses for both national governments and donor agencies. To date, only Uganda has a fully comprehensive education SWAP, with all the key features of this approach, including pooled funding: this is now operating successfully. More typically, countries (such as Ghana and Zambia) have moved only slowly towards the implementation of full SWAPs for basic education, but most are making steady progress towards this goal. In a sizeable minority of countries (including Bangladesh, Kenya, and Malawi), the absence of the necessary preconditions frustrates the introduction of SWAPs.

Education SWAPS: emerging lessons

Partnership and trust: SWAPs are inherently complex processes. They require fundamental change in the way governments and donors behave and relate to one another. Prerequisites include close partnership based on high levels of trust, effective mechanisms for negotiation, and flexibility.

Leadership, ownership and coordination: Local ownership and leadership of education sector SWAPs have varied considerably. There is often tension between efforts to maximise local ownership, on the one hand, and increased donor involvement in policy and management issues, on the other. SWAPs have tended to result in higher levels of donor conditionality - yet, if there are too many conditions, they become non-enforceable. Achieving the required level of donor co-ordination has generally been difficult.

Sector planning and performance: The focus on the development of well-designed national education strategies has undoubtedly been a major benefit of education SWAPs. However, this has increased rather than decreased the demands on local planning and management capacity, in particular where decentralisation is a major objective.

Transaction costs: SWAPs should reduce costs associated with direct management of donor-supported interventions. While the number of technical assistants has declined, the knowledge and skills required by DFID education advisers 'in-house' has changed. The primary need now is for experienced individuals who are skilled in policy analysis and monitoring and evaluation in low-income developing countries.

Better monitoring and evaluation: A focus on the sector as a whole can make some aspects of monitoring and evaluation easier and joint review arrangements can make for a more co-ordinated and detailed monitoring and evaluation exercise. But data currently available to national ministries is often insufficiently comprehensive or accurate.

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department for International Development

DEPARTMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Department for International Development (DFID) is the UK government department responsible for promoting development and the reduction of poverty. The government first elected in 1997 has increased its commitment to development by strengthening the department and increasing its budget.

The central focus of the government's policy, set out in the 1997 White Paper on International Development, is a commitment to the internationally agreed target to halve the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015, together with the associated targets including basic health care provision and universal access to primary education by the same date. The second White Paper on International Development, published in December 2000, reaffirmed this commitment, while focusing specifically on how to manage the process of globalisation to benefit poor people.

DFID seeks to work in partnership with governments which are committed to the international targets, and seeks to work with business, civil society and the research community to this end. We also work with multilateral institutions including the World Bank, United Nations agencies and the European Community.

The bulk of our assistance is concentrated on the poorest countries in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. We are also contributing to poverty elimination and sustainable development in middle income countries in Latin America, the Caribbean and elsewhere. DFID is also helping the transition countries in central and eastern Europe to try to ensure that the process of change brings benefits to all people and particularly to the poorest.

As well as its headquarters in London and East Kilbride, DFID has offices in many developing countries. In others, DFID works through staff based in British embassies and high commissions.

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