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STRENGTHENING PRIMARY EDUCATION IN KENYA

The ODA-assisted Strengthening Primary Education Project (SPRED), implemented in Kenya from 1991 - 1996, helped to raise the quality of teaching and learning in key subject areas and improved links between educational research and policy. A successor project (SPRED2) is building on lessons learned from SPRED.

MAIN FINDINGS

- Cascade training risks sacrificing training quality for quantity. To ensure that training cascades are effective and well-targeted, they require 'bottom-up design' based on assessment of beneficiaries' training needs, and formative evaluation of the inevitably 'top down' training process.
- The scale of international expertise built into a project should be justified not only in terms of its cost-effectiveness but also with regard to its potentially negative impact on the development and use of local capacity.
- Projects provide an opportunity to develop sectoral structures and systems. Without such institutionalisation, project impacts may not be sustainable.
- Even where cultural norms and local sensitivities seem unfavourable, promotion of gender awareness can lead to acceptance of positive gender models
- Poverty and, especially, food insecurity are major factors limiting equitable access to education.

The Project

The Strengthening of Primary Education (SPRED1) project was implemented in Kenya from 1991 - 1996 with total funding of £3.9 million. The project set out to raise the quality of teaching and learning in key subjects (Mathematics, Science and English) through in-service teacher training. This was delivered through a national network of Teachers Advisory Centres (TACs - see box), and by improving links between in-service training and pre-service training. The project also aimed at improving access for all Kenyan children to the full cycle of primary education through better understanding of the reasons for poor enrolment and retention.

Findings

The project design was consistent with the Government of Kenya's policy framework and built on British experience and strengths in education in Kenya. However, there were significant weaknesses in the design of the training cascade and in the lack of integration of TACs within the educational system (see boxes below). Field level personnel and beneficiaries were insufficiently involved in project design leading to over-dependence on British expertise and underutilisation of local capacity. Inadequate attention was given to monitoring and evaluation.

In terms of overall impact, the project was partly successful. Through the quality improvement component, the project successfully developed the professional skills

Teachers Advisory Centres

Teachers' Advisory Centres (TACs) are intended to provide an accessible venue, resources and expertise to help primary school teachers develop their professional competence. Each typically serves 15-20 primary schools for which, staffed by a TAC tutor, it functions as an in-service training centre and library.

However, SPRED failed to integrate TACs into the educational system. Insufficient attention was given to involving Head Teachers and the National Inspectorate, and to the career structure of TAC tutors, resulting in considerable attrition of TAC tutors. The structural links between in-service and pre-service training remain weak.

of many Kenyan educators, including some 1200 TAC tutors. Resources were provided to all TACs and 63 new TACs were built and equipped. Screening of books for a national book-box scheme increased gender-awareness in the education and publishing communities. But the TACs were not integrated into the educational system, reducing their sustainability. Although teachers were helped to experiment with child-centred classroom organisation and practice, rote learning for examinations continues to dominate classroom practice, especially in the later grades. SPRED's operational research and information component led to better understanding of the causes of low enrolment and high wastage in primary schools. But neglect of parents' and children's perspectives has helped to perpetuate an 'establishment' view and a tendency to 'blame the customers'. Although linkages

between research and policy were strengthened, implementation delays prevented development of innovative interventions to improve equitable access and pupil retention.

Training cascades

SPRED's design included a 'cascade' of training, starting with London-based training for national SPRED trainers, through several levels, including TAC tutors, to teachers. Experience elsewhere has highlighted the difficulty of matching training inputs at the top of the cascade to the training needs of those at the base (teachers), especially where, as in SPRED, training seeks to change working practices rather than convey a simple package of facts or skills. Training content easily becomes distorted and attenuated. SPRED failed to make adequate assessment of teachers' training needs or to review the impact of TAC training. Consequently, impact was reduced and distortions crept in. As one respondent said, "The trouble with cascades is that those at the bottom don't get wet, or they get wet with dirty water"!

Training cascades require 'bottom-up design' based on assessment of training needs of the ultimate beneficiaries, and formative evaluation of the inevitably 'top down' training process.

Some policy issues

The evaluation identified several findings of wider policy relevance:

- **Unregulated cost sharing is the enemy of equitable access:** cost recovery from parents is currently unregulated and is increasing. Despite parents' willingness to make sacrifices, the cost to parents is an important factor in low enrolment and poor retention.
- **Schools encourage wastage...** The Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examinations and the public league table of examination results dominate primary schooling in Kenya and produce a climate in which schools may 'encourage' weak pupils to drop out and repeat years.
- **...and resist new classroom practice:** In these circumstances, schools are extremely resistant to changes in classroom practice unless they offer the hope of improved examination performance. They resist the introduction of innovative 'active learning' and 'child-centred' approaches.
- **Blaming the customers:** the standard model of primary schooling does not fit everybody: for example, given their way of life, children in nomadic communities find it difficult to attend conventional schools regularly. A more flexible approach is required linking assessment of 'demand' with assessment of 'need'.
- **"Survival comes first and that means food"** (rural parent). Food insecurity seriously constrains the enrolment and attendance of both girls and boys. Whereas education staff cited parental ignorance, ill-health and poverty as the major causes of non-enrolment and dropouts, parents - in 9 out of 10 Districts - said that seasonal famine and general food insecurity is the most pressing reason for not sending children to school and for children dropping out. Teachers from food insecure districts pointed out that once school feeding programmes were discontinued, enrolment rates decreased and drop out rates increased dramatically.

Learning lessons

A number of lessons learned in SPRED are already reflected in the design of SPRED's successor project, SPRED2, and other recent work in the sector. These interventions take due account of wider structural constraints; they have involved field-level personnel and

beneficiaries more closely in design, implementation and evaluation; baseline studies have been undertaken to inform subsequent monitoring and evaluation; and management responsibilities are more clearly allocated.

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This evaluation was commissioned by DFID's Evaluation Department and undertaken by a team fielded by Cambridge Education Consultants and Education for Change, led by John Wood. Participatory field research was undertaken by a team of ten Kenyan researchers contracted by KimKam Consultants, Nairobi.

For further information see " Strengthening Primary Education in Kenya: an evaluation of the Kenya Strengthening Education Project (SPRED1), 1991 - 1996" (Evaluation Report EV 627), obtainable from Evaluation Department, Department for International Development, 94 Victoria Street, London SW1E 5JL, telephone 0171- 917-0243. This report will also be accessible via the Internet at DFID's website.

Of related interest: DFID's Evaluation Department will shortly publish evaluations of two DFID funded primary education projects: the Active Learning and Professional Support (ALPS) Project, Indonesia and the Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Project (APPEP), India. SPRED, ALPS and APPEP all feature in the evaluation synthesis study currently in preparation, entitled An Evaluation of British Assistance to Primary Schooling 1988-1998.

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The policy of the government was set out in the White Paper on International Development, published in November 1997. The central focus of the policy 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.

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