Local Solutions to Global Challenges: Towards Effective Partnership in Basic Education

Key Findings of the Joint Evaluation of External Support to Basic Education in Developing Countries

There is an ongoing global search for meaningful partnership as the road to effective provision and use of external support to basic education in developing countries. The commitment to partnership is evident in the efforts of external agencies and national and local partners over the period from 1990 to 2002. The challenge now is to increase the willingness and determination to improve basic education through locally developed solutions which are relevant to the context of each partner country and are built from the ground up rather than through the application of blueprints or templates developed at a global level.

Background

In the sequels to the World Education Forum held in Dakar in April 2000, a Consultative Group of Evaluation Departments, representing thirteen international and national funding and technical assistance agencies, agreed to undertake a joint evaluation of external support to basic education in developing countries. They were subsequently joined in this effort by four partner countries: Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Uganda and Zambia. The joint evaluation was itself an effort at effective partnership.

Objective of the Evaluation

To examine the process of external support to basic education provided by international and national funding and technical assistance agencies to partner countries in the South, including its intents, forms, uses, results and consequences in order to draw lessons for policy and programme improvement.

Main Components

The three main components were:

1. an assessment of the nature and evolution of external support to basic education from 1990 to 2002;
2. an assessment of the effectiveness and efficiency of externally supported basic education activities in selected countries; and,
3. a review of efforts to re-conceptualize external support as partnerships for basic education development and their consequences.

Methodology and Approach

The evaluation focussed on the process of external support to basic education and its use by partner countries at three distinct levels:

- intents, policies and strategies;
- practices; and,
- results and consequences.

The methodologies used to address the evaluation issues were a global review of available documentation on external support to basic education and illustrative case studies of external support to basic education in Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Uganda and Zambia.

The four partner countries served on the Evaluation Steering Committee alongside the thirteen sponsoring agencies and helped to guide the work of the evaluators.

Two distinctive features of the evaluation were the participation of partner countries in planning and governance and the integration of international consultants and consultants based in the four countries into cohesive study teams. Another was the synthesis of a global overview gained from the document review with evaluation results from the participating countries.

Reports

Evaluation reports are available in electronic form at www.euforic.org/iob in English, French and Spanish. They include: Local Solutions to Global Challenges: Towards Effective Partnership in Basic Education: Final Report as well as Country Study Reports for Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Uganda and Zambia; and the Document Review Report.

The evaluation reports and a data base of the documents collected for the document review are also available on CD-ROM. The evaluation is also covered in the OECD DAC inventory of evaluation abstracts at www.dac-evaluations-cad.org.

Key Conclusions and Their Implications

1. Emphasis on Local Solutions

There has been a strong tendency for external agencies to place increasing emphasis on the use of external support for accelerating progress in basic education, especially in relation to the education goals of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and to the Education For All (EFA) goals. This tendency has been accompanied, at times, by a reliance on blueprints, templates and prescribed solutions that has been detrimental to a commitment to partnership, has been inconsistent with the capacities of partners, and has sometimes limited the relevance of programmes and projects. There is a need to place greater emphasis on the relevance of external support to local needs and capacities – for more tailored local solutions within a global consensus on goals.

External agencies and national and local partners must find ways to support and implement basic education programmes that are more reflective of national and local needs and capacities while remaining true to the global commitment to provide access to all facets of quality basic education. Possible strategies include:

- Ensuring meaningful participation by a more diverse group of stakeholders in the development of national programmes, including Sector Wide Approach (SWAp) arrangements;
- Placing students, parents and teachers more centrally in the process of programme design and development and avoiding measures that reduce the professional standing of teachers;
- The policy direction and operational design of major programmes in basic education must be grounded in national and local needs and priorities despite the inherently stronger negotiating position of external agencies.

2. Sector-Wide Approach as a Partnership Process

The movement to programme support and SWAps is one of the most significant trends in the provision and use of external support to basic education. It has been intended to contribute to strengthened national ownership and to improve partnership (and thereby improve the effectiveness of the provision and use of external support). In a real sense, the shift to programme support is an indication of the commitment of external agencies to strengthen partnership.

However, this form of support does not necessarily improve partnerships if implemented as a blueprint rather than a process. It has, in some cases, contributed to increased tensions and divisions among distinct groups of external agencies. On the positive side, it has led to some improvements in the sense of national ownership and to better coordination of external assistance.

The major strategic shift required in the development of SWAps in basic education is a commitment to an ongoing process of cooperation rather than a blueprint for programmatic action. The process approach to SWAps would include strategies such as:

- Ensuring that policies on budget support, programme support and SWAps recognize the cross-linkages and compatibilities between projects and programmes;
- Providing project and programme assistance in support of innovation integrated into the national plan and programme for basic education; and,
- Ensuring that the ministry of education and other ministries involved in basic education participate in public sector reform programmes.

3. The Role of Project Support

The movement to programme support to basic education needs to be accompanied by an understanding of the positive role of project assistance, especially in supporting innovations and in providing targeted support to marginalized groups. There is considerable evidence that project forms of support can be more effectively integrated into programme approaches with the consequent effect of strengthening the positive aspects of both modalities.

What is required is a more pragmatic approach recognizing the positive role of project support in the development of innovative strategies and approaches and in reaching marginalized groups.

Development of programme approaches to supporting basic education may be seen as an

important advance in the effectiveness of projects themselves since they can now be better linked to nation-wide efforts. Automatic assumptions that programme support is superior or excludes the possibility of projects should be avoided in favour of an effort to better integrate projects into wider programmes.

4. Administrative Burden

The movement to programme approaches in supporting basic education has not always been accompanied, at least in the short term, by a reduction in the administrative burden for host governments. A very heavy burden of planning, coordination and monitoring has been made more difficult by uneven progress in the development of common administrative procedures among external agencies and a reluctance to accept local procedures as adequate.

In practice, the procedures and systems required to plan, negotiate, implement, monitor and evaluate programmes supported by multiple external agencies represent a new administrative load for partner countries. If it is to deliver on the promise of a reduced administrative burden, the move to programme support must be accompanied by a strong commitment among external agencies to simplify and harmonize their administrative and procedural requirements, including requirements for monitoring and evaluation.

5. Beyond Primary Schooling

Although there is agreement on the broad range of components included in basic education, the focus of most activities of both external agencies and national partners has been placed on formal primary schooling with subsequent negative effects on other areas of basic education. Further, while progress has been made in providing access to primary schooling, there are serious persistent problems in improving the quality of basic education.

External agencies and partner governments must ensure that their policy environments promote and encourage investment in all components of basic education.

They should work to ensure that the educational Millennium Development Goals are not used to discourage support for other Education For All goals.

Strategies for improving the quality and relevance of externally supported projects and programmes in basic education may include:

- Continuing to fund technical assistance projects within the framework of programme or sector-wide support that allows for the testing of innovative ideas to directly address quality and relevance; and,
- Supporting research efforts and reviews of promising initiatives that allow for more explicit links between basic education and poverty reduction in the development of policies.

It will be necessary to promote a culture of innovation and change within ministries of education to better support efforts to improve quality based on the results of formative and mid-term evaluations.

Relevance and quality in basic education may also be improved by strengthening participation in school management and accountability structures by parents and learners.

6. Securing Sustained Funding

There has been a sustained agreement within the international community, including external agencies and national partners, on the priority of basic education, but funding levels from the external agencies have not kept pace with expectations or implied commitments. This is, at least in part, a reflection of both the complexity of planning and resource allocation processes surrounding the provision of external support and of problems in the absorptive capacity of partner governments.

In addition to reducing the apparent gap between the financial resources needed to provide quality basic education to all and those currently available, external agencies and partners will need to overcome the apparent problem of the longer term sustainability of expanded systems of basic education.

External agencies and national partners must recognize that investments in capacity development can be linked to increases in both external and national resources dedicated to basic education – thus providing a strategy for overcoming absorptive capacity limitations which in turn inhibit the flow of external resources.

There is also a need to link goal-setting at a global and national level directly to the duration of external commitments, so that the achievement of longer term goals is not subject to disruptive fluctuations in short-term external support.

Follow-Up and Dissemination

The Joint Evaluation includes activities to promote national and global dialogue on improving the effectiveness of external support to basic education in developing countries. These include:

- Workshops in each of the four participating countries;
- Participation in regional forums such as the 2003 Biennial Meeting of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa;
- Workshops and seminars held internally in the sponsoring agencies;
- An international colloquium with education experts from partner countries and external agencies planned for early 2004; and;
- Dissemination of the evaluation results in hard copy, on compact discs and in electronic form on the world-wide-web.

Requests for the products of the evaluation should be directed to the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB), Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, P.O Box 20061, 2500 EB, The Hague, The Netherlands.