

The challenge of delivering quality education in sub-Saharan Africa

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In June 2012, a seminar took place in Kampala, Uganda, entitled 'Achievable Education for All'. Supported by the Commonwealth Foundation, the Open Society Foundation, the European Union (EU) and the Department for International Development (DfID), the workshop was facilitated by Link Community Development and the Commonwealth Consortium for Education represented by Peter Williams.

Our intention was not to hold yet another workshop for donors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and academics to exchange their views on Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals. Instead, it was to facilitate a gathering of Ministry of Education officials and selected district officials from Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, South Africa and Uganda – officials responsible for both policy and delivery of education in their respective countries.

The district teams that attended have been working for between five to ten years with Link Community Development, an international NGO working in partnership with national ministries of education to improve school performance. The participating districts have been the long-term focus of Link technical assistance. The Kampala workshop was the first opportunity to bring together policy-makers and deliverers from all five countries, to reflect on their realities.

So what did they conclude? Well, it isn't particularly surprising that countries embarking on universal primary education will fall short of concluding that the policy isn't working. However, they were frank enough to recognise that the pursuit of quantity is at the expense of quality, and that in most countries the budget available cannot finance the supply side inputs required to achieve any real improvements in quality.

A number of familiar challenges were raised. Clearly, the introduction of universal primary education has involved major increases in enrolment, yet, with the exception of South Africa, there remains a lack of resources to enable effective access to quality education. Even in South Africa, which has largely achieved universal access to education, the national department has suggested that 80 per cent of schools are dysfunctional and the majority of these are in rural areas. Several countries highlighted the challenge of measuring school performance by school leaver exam results and the 'success' that can be achieved by removing students who are likely to fail from exam classes.

Apart from the challenge of extremely large class sizes, there was also focus on two key areas: first, the level of education of teachers and, second, teachers' command of the language of instruction.



The 2012 Link/Commonwealth Consortium for Education Seminar, Kampala

While it was recognised that more research was required, it was accepted that in all five of the participating countries, English becomes the language of instruction after foundation phase, and the command of English by teachers, students and the community, is a major challenge that needs to be faced.

The workshop also focused on some of the positive attempts to improve school performance, with separate and collective review of their application of approaches to school monitoring and support at district level. All of the countries have delivered versions of school monitoring and support, which include some common activities:

- A benchmark of an 'achievable standard' for school performance.
- Measurement of all schools against that standard.
- Engaging with a developmental process at both school and district level, using the school performance information as diagnostics to inform both school-improvement plans and district improvement plans.
- A district or circuit conference to engage all schools with common and school specific challenges.
- A school performance appraisal meeting (SPAM) enabling parents to learn about school performance (this can be in the form of a school report card) and the school's plans to improve.

Overall, the workshop concluded that access to relevant information could inform the more effective allocation of limited resources, and that the adoption of more developmental approaches to school monitoring can improve ownership of decision-making and encourage school leaders.

The one area in which all participants wanted to focus on in more detail was the application of school report cards, influenced and encouraged by an energetic presentation by Charles Aheto-Tsegah, Deputy Director General of Ghana Education Service. As a result of the seminar, a future study tour is planned in Accra to learn more about Ghana's application of the cards. Link will also be researching the potential for web-based access to school report card information to enable policy-makers to draw relevant information from district and school data.

The Achievable Education For All workshop was an example of how the Commonwealth can engage with a topic that is directly relevant to the day-to-day activities of schools in developing countries. With the support of the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth Consortium for Education, together with funding from the Open Society Foundation, Link was able to create the space for policy-makers to reflect on challenges and progress, and to map out a way ahead.

In conclusion, only an eternal optimist would suggest that the supply side gaps will be closed within existing budget parameters. Continued focus on an unachievable traditional model of schooling therefore needs to be questioned, and the focus shifted to what can be achieved with the limited resources available.



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