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Scaling up education interventions in Kenya: the importance of institutions

By Tessa Bold, Mwangi Kimenyi, Germano Mwabu, Alice Ng'ang'a and Justin Sandefur

Seeking solutions to improve school performance in Kenya

Following the introduction of Free Primary Education in Kenya in 2003, there was concern that despite the increase in enrollment, the quality of the education provided was deficient, as indicated by the low pupils' scores. The purpose of designing and evaluating policies to improve school performance thus became a new priority for education in Kenya.

One of the proposed solutions was the **scaling up of a "contract teacher intervention"**, previously introduced by an NGO in Western Kenya, where it was shown to have raised test scores for primary students.

However, the idea of generalizing results from one experimental program evaluation to assess the effect of scaling up the intervention raises delicate concerns as well – particularly in regards to issues of external validity (heterogeneity of treatment effects, interactions with subjects' characteristics, etc.)

Another concern is raised as to whether a successful NGO pilot project can be replicated and implemented by governmental agencies and, in particular, within the institutional constraints of bureaucracies in the developing world.

EVALUATION PROJECT

In 2008, a team of PEP-supported researchers in Kenya set out to realize a highly rigorous experimental evaluation, using the technique of randomized controlled trials, to assess the potential success (or effectiveness) of such an intervention's scaling up in Kenya.

They randomly selected 192 primary schools throughout Kenya's 8 provinces, that were then randomly assigned to participate in one of two parallel projects – one was implemented and run by the Ministry of Education, the other by World Vision Kenya (NGO).

The project included 2 different types of interventions:

- 1- "community-support teachers were employed on short-term contracts and assigned to lower-grade classes
- 2- members of the "Schools' Management Committees" were provided with governance training

Each group of 96 schools was also divided in 3 categories of "treatment type": a 1st group was provided only with contract teachers, a 2nd with both interventions, and a 3rd with none (control group).

Key findings and conclusions

Overall, when comparing pupils' performance between schools of the control group with both groups of treatment schools, the researchers find significant positive effect of the treatments, especially for math and English scores, but all of which was due to the increase of the performance in schools assigned to NGO implementation.

Disaggregated analysis of the samples show no further distinctions between schools of various types, characteristics or locations (e.g. class size, high or low-intensity areas, etc.)

Policy recommendations

The empirical evidence that results from this evaluation provides important guidance to policymakers, especially in regards to the political economy issues that arise when scaling up interventions, based on the success of small-scale NGO trials.

The results show indeed that, no matter how carefully and rigorously an intervention is designed, the end results and effectiveness in reaching targets may just as largely **depend on the nature of the program implementer, and the institutional context** or constraints:

- A "contract teacher program" implemented by a government agency – i.e. subject of the organization constraints of the public sector bureaucracy – or by an international NGO with foreign technical assistance and careful monitoring – will achieve completely different results.
- In small-scale trials, contract teachers were effective at raising pupil performance. When scaled-up nationally, contract teachers paid at half the rate of civil service teachers led to a backlash by the teacher unions, the salient features of teacher contracts were compromised, and the effectiveness of the program was undermined

While the authors have managed to demonstrate that extrapolating results from an NGO program to national government policy is not a valid option, they recommend that, in all cases:

- Government implementers should be involved in such projects, right from the initial "pilot" stage
- Researchers involved in policy evaluation should work in close collaboration with the institution whose policies they wish to inform