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Community Involvement Improves Performance in Ugandan Primary Schools

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Challenges to universal primary education in uganda

Despite relative success in improving school access in Uganda since the mid-90s, learning outcomes at the national level remain poor, and challenges remain to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) – despite a noted increase in devoted resources over the past 10 years – especially in terms of "quality" of education services.

For instance, teacher absenteeism in Ugandan primary schools is rife, and yet rarely sanctioned by oversight institutions such as the **School Management Committees (SMCs)** which, in general, are known to function poorly. Moreover, previous studies have shown that the "weakness of accountability mechanisms between school administrators, teachers, and the communities" is an important factor contributing to such low educational achievements in Uganda. Therefore, identifying ways to strengthen these mechanisms in the delivery of free primary education is a major priority concern among policy makers in the country.

In order to assist decision-makers in addressing such complex issues, a team of PEP-supported local researchers - in collaboration with **the Economic Policy Research Center (EPRC, Kampala) and the Center for Study of African Economies (CSAE, Oxford)** - decided to conduct a "Randomized Controlled Trial" (RCT) to find ways to improve the management of primary schools in Uganda.

More specifically, the initiative aimed **to assess the effectiveness of two different types of community-based monitoring interventions.**

The project, which lasted 3 years (2008-10), involved **SMCs of 120 rural public primary schools**, in 4 districts of Uganda. These SMCs were randomly **assigned in 2 groups**, each appointed to test a different "approach" or type of monitoring intervention:

1) **A "standardized" approach**: in which SMCs were trained in the use of "best practice tools" of monitoring.
2) **A "participatory" approach**: in which SMCs designed their own monitoring instruments, based on their own set of priorities.

Key findings

Measuring performance

In addition to the resulting "scorecards" – in which SMC members rated their schools according to a list of various performance indicators - the concerned schools' pupils were administered* both numeracy and literacy tests, before and after the intervention, in order to assess the impact of each new monitoring system on educational outcomes.

* In collaboration with the National Assessment of Progress in Education (NAPE), from Uganda's National Examination Board.

Assessing the value of "scores"

First, it is important to keep in mind that, as teachers are often members of the SMCs, they have also contributed to both rating scores in the "standard" cards, and to identify priority issues to be included for monitoring in the "participatory" (or "self-designed") cards. Thus…

Scores from the "standard" cards reflect general dissatis- faction with the conditions in which "the communities are involved with the schools":

- In particular, the instances in which substantial contributions are required from the parents (e.g. provision of school meals, improvement of school facilities, etc.) are rated among the worst areas of performance.

By contrast, teachers are rated as relatively well-prepared, with only mild problems of attendance and teaching methods.

And indicators selected in the "participatory" cards typically reflect the teachers' specific issues of concern, such as staff housing and the emphasis put on parents' responsibility in supporting the pupils' learning.

Assessing the impact of monitoring interventions

In terms of impact, the introduction of a monitoring system based on a "**participatory approach**" (self-design of monitoring tools) seems to have more significantly **positive effect on educational outcomes**, leading to higher effort levels from both the providers and the clients of the schools – as shown through the pupil test scores – as well as recorded attendance of both pupils and teachers. The researchers suggest **two reasons** to explain why the "participatory approach" may be more effective than a "standard" monitoring approach; the former does indeed:

- Allow for collection of data that is tailored to the needs and preferences of school management.
- Provide an opportunity to coordinate expectations and actions of both teachers and parents.

Policy implications and recommendations

These results have immediate implications for education policy in Uganda, and other countries with similar contexts. Indeed, in a context where accountability is low, and where test-based incentives may be expensive, implementing a system to collect "information-for-accountability" from community-based monitoring interventions provides a cost-effective alternative.

The "participatory scorecard approach" evaluated in this project has shown to have strong effects at relatively little cost. Moreover, regarding the design of monitoring program interventions, the results suggest that participatory engagement of the community - including the delegation of some authority over monitoring activities - may be essential to success.

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