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Department for International Development

Bilateral Support to Primary Education

Summary

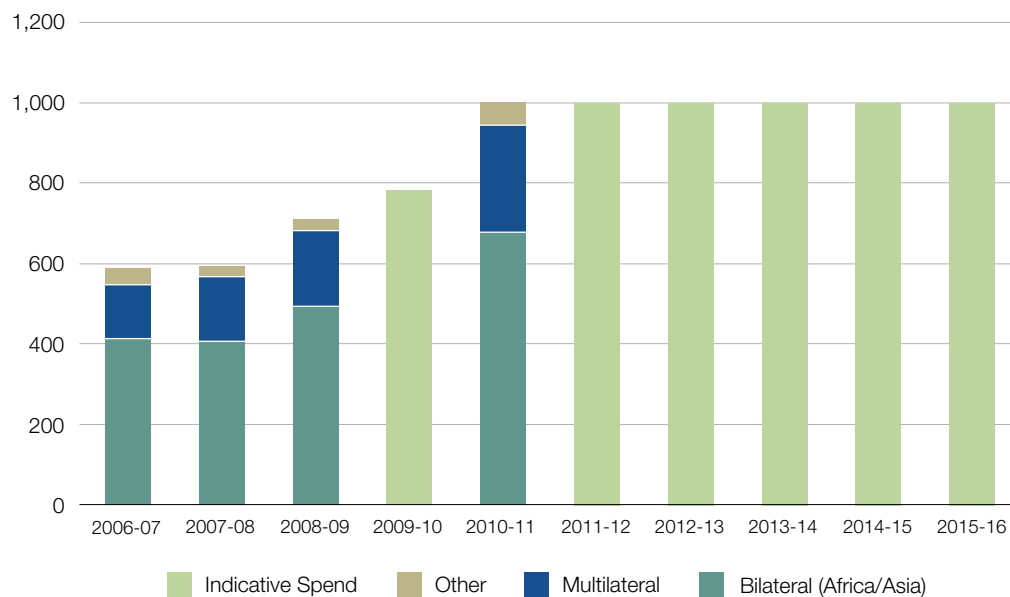
1 The UK is a signatory to ambitious United Nations Millennium Development Goals seeking primary education for all by 2015 and reduced illiteracy in developing countries, with all children able to complete a full course of good quality primary schooling. DFID's 2001 education strategy incorporated these goals, targeting:

- access to and completion of good quality education for all children, including girls and marginalised groups; and
- recognised and measurable learning outcomes, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

2 The Department for International Development (DFID) has committed to rising expenditure on education; planned to reach at least £1 billion in 2010-11 (**Figure 1**). Some 69 per cent is bilateral (country-to-country), while the rest is channelled through other organisations. DFID is amongst the largest funders of primary education alongside the World Bank and the Netherlands. It estimates that its financial contributions in 2007-08 funded around five million children in state primary schools¹.

Figure 1
DFID expenditure for Education

Education Aid per year (£m)



NOTE

1 Cumulative spend = £8.5 billion.

Source: Department for International Development

3 This report focuses on DFID's support to primary education in developing countries since it started to implement the UN Goals in 2001, and what it has achieved against the criteria of pupil enrolment, course completion and attainment. The report also uses indicators, some widely used by international bodies, to assess the extent of efficiency and cost-effectiveness in delivery. Data on costs and progress in countries is generally weak and incomplete. It is rarely possible to analyse the share of progress attributable to specific interventions. But where DFID interventions plan to contribute to progress against particular targets, it is reasonable to associate DFID with the related successes or failures, even though performance depends on the education systems DFID supports. Education systems in developing countries are typically funded at under US\$100 annually per child, and this relatively low level of funding influences the outcomes that can be expected.

Key findings

Support to education systems

4 DFID's aim has been to improve and expand state primary education. Its general approach is to move away from delivering aid directly towards influencing and supporting developing country governments' policies to pursue Millennium Development Goals. It derives influence partly as a large donor to state education systems, directing predictable long-term funding through developing country government budgets and specific programmes for school building, textbook procurement and teacher training. Although DFID funding typically represents only around 5 per cent of the national or state primary education budgets it supports, it also encourages other donors to support these systems. In addition, it exerts influence by providing valued technical assistance and policy advice to Ministries of Education, and by work to build management capacity and governance in education systems. The governments it has chosen to work with have largely adopted the goals of universal primary education, gender parity and free primary education – aims prioritised by DFID since 2001. Ministry officials and other donors we spoke to considered DFID a key and supportive donor, responsive to national situations and able to act quickly. But the extent of DFID's influence with national governments varies, partly due to political circumstances as well as how DFID chooses to deliver its programmes.

On enrolment and completion

5 DFID has adopted Millennium Development Goal indicators for enrolment, including parity between girls and boys, in its Public Service Agreement targets for 22 priority countries (**Figure 2** overleaf). Fourteen of these countries are on track to achieve the enrolment goal by 2015, with primary school enrolment in DFID priority countries up from typically 50 per cent or lower in the mid-1990s to 70-90 per cent now. Progress on gender parity has been good, with eight of the 22 already having achieved the goal.

Figure 2

DFID progress against enrolment targets

DFID PSA Success Measure

Enrolment in primary education: 12 countries to be kept on-track and progress accelerated in at least four of the remainder.

Ratio of girls to boys in primary education: 17 countries to be kept on-track and progress accelerated in at least two of the remainder.

Achievement

Fourteen countries remain on-track. Of the rest five are off-track, with progress accelerated in two. Three have insufficient data to measure progress.

Eighteen countries remain on-track; of the remainder three are off-track, and Sudan has insufficient data.

Source: Department for International Development

6 Despite rising enrolment, many challenges remain. Traditional schooling cannot cost-effectively reach remote or migrant communities. There are few rigorous assessments of cost-effectiveness, though evaluation of a non-formal education scheme in Ghana using flexible timetabling, vocational content and community-based teachers, showed it to be 30 times more cost-effective than traditional models. DFID has concentrated its efforts in promoting and funding non-formal approaches to reach the unenrolled, rather than considering the scope to enhance overall cost-effectiveness and affordability by extending successful non-formal approaches into formal schooling.

7 Enrolment is a crucial first step into education. It was therefore a helpful point of focus for DFID's efforts to support greater educational access. However, it is not a sufficient measure of access to education because pupil dropout in developing countries is high, and the amount of education delivered and received is low. Primary education can help poverty reduction only if it equips children with basic knowledge and skills to further their own, and their societies', development. Research indicates that one additional year of education adds approximately 10 per cent to a person's wage. Returns are particularly high for girls if they progress through to secondary, though recent statistics show only 44 per cent do this. So continued attendance is a crucial measure: but among DFID's priority countries typical dropout rates are 10 to 15 per cent for Year One. Completion rates for primary education as a whole are low, ranging from 17 per cent (Malawi) to 57 per cent (Nepal), though calculation of completion is problematic and DFID believes rates in India may be higher. DFID has not incorporated completion into its PSA targets, but tracks this in its departmental strategic objectives.

On attainment

8 Pupil attainment has been poorly measured. DFID has periodically supported initiatives in some countries to improve measurement, but has not consistently supported or required better measurement across its portfolio. The limited data available shows levels of attainment remaining low. Assessments in Ghana, for example, show 11-26 per cent of Year Six students as proficient in English and Maths. There is little or no progress on literacy since the United Nations agreed the Goals in 2000. High enrolment increases the proportion of children from uneducated families, increasing the difficulty of improved attainment.

9 Since 2001 DFID programme objectives have emphasised enrolment much more than completion or attainment, though activities to expand provision, such as teacher training or the procurement of textbooks, would also have been conducive to quality. The imbalance in part reflects how governments and donors collectively have interpreted Millennium Development Goals for Education. The imbalance is beginning to evolve; DFID's programme in India began to promote quality more explicitly from 2008, though effects on achievement will take time to emerge. In Africa, some new programmes address these factors directly – the Quality Improvement Programme in Ethiopia, aims for 9 and 3 percentage point improvements in completion and achievement respectively over three years.

On the efficient use of resources

10 DFID practices devolved management, in which individual country offices manage their resources and operations. DFID's country plans focused on unmet need and ways to expand and strengthen government systems, but did not articulate how planned DFID action, together with that of its development partners, would secure cost-effective, sustainable service delivery towards universal primary education. Indicators of cost effectiveness, such as those specified in an international education indicative framework since 2003, feature little in plans or monitoring. The first DFID review of its education portfolio, in 2009, identified wide variations in DFID approaches and apparent cost-effectiveness, but was not able to distinguish the effect of different contexts from the scope for improved performance. In some countries DFID has funded technical assistance, for example to remove ghost teachers from payrolls, or improved procurement of textbooks. But on the whole it has only fragmentary information on whether pay, materials and school infrastructure costs have been minimised, or on whether outputs, such as lessons taught and contact hours, have been maximised, to permit broad judgements on efficiency. The available evidence indicates scope for improvement.

11 Teachers' pay dominates education budgets, yet DFID has had little focus on it. We found little evidence over the period of monitoring pay levels against international or national comparators and taking specific action, despite indications that teachers' pay above these indicative benchmarks has limited the affordability of educational expansion in DFID priority countries. Work supported by DFID since late 2009 in Ghana has confirmed the extent of the challenge there. An increased focus on affordability will need to consider any effects on quality of teaching.

12 On teacher performance, we found growing awareness of problems but as yet little success in securing improvement.

- Teacher attendance remains problematic, with absences estimated at up to 40 per cent. Time actually teaching is low; as little as one third of intended hours in Ethiopia.
- School inspection arrangements exist in each country we visited, but are not fully functional or resourced. The results of such scrutinies were not always centrally collated. But even where they were, as for school audit in Kenya, DFID did not see them, accepting partner governments' autonomy to choose what they share with donors. DFID is supporting new arrangements such as school score cards to boost community oversight, but impacts are not yet clear.

- DFID has collated information on the unit costs of teacher training, but wide variations in costs have not been explained. In Kenya, teachers are still being trained despite large numbers of qualified teachers being unemployed. In Ethiopia, teachers were selected mainly from the weakest graduates from secondary schooling, leading to quality problems and supplementary training.

13 DFID funds procurement of classrooms and textbooks in many of the countries it assists. A recent DFID review identified wide ranges in unit costs, Classroom construction varied from US\$3,600 to US\$20,000, while on average textbooks ranged from US\$0.50 to US\$5.00. Such wide ranges suggest national circumstances alone would not fully explain variations, and further DFID analysis could identify scope for improved value for money. Experience from a DFID-supported unit in Kenya, showing that community contracting could build classrooms at half the cost of centralised contracting, illustrates the potential for improved performance.

14 In March 2010 Ministers announced a new strategy for education with three strategic priorities:

- Access to a basic cycle of primary and lower secondary education, particularly in fragile and conflict affected states.
- Quality of teaching and learning, particularly for basic literacy and numeracy.
- Skills so that young people benefit from opportunities, jobs and growth.

These elements are not new: DFID acknowledged in 2001 that providing poor quality education to more children risked wasting scarce resources, and that without improving quality, education outcomes and broader developmental impacts would not be delivered. The new strategy gives this greater emphasis.

Conclusion on value for money

15 DFID has successfully supported developing countries to pursue universal enrolment and improve educational prospects for girls. It has helped secure significant progress against ambitious targets – although the enrolment targets and Goals are unlikely to be achieved in full, enrolment in DFID priority countries has increased significantly. It has clearly acted as a positive influence in many ways, with qualitative and quantitative effects on education policy and delivery. The economic benefits of attending school in developing countries are high, and research into wage rate returns indicates that they exceed the costs. Improved numeracy and literacy also increase social benefits.

16 Educational quality and attainment, however, have remained at the very low levels prevailing at the start of DFID's 2001 Education Strategy. DFID support has increased the scale of provision, but placed insufficient emphasis on quality and cost-effectiveness. DFID has only recently started to address this imbalance. The

available evidence indicates that aided education systems remain inefficient, consuming scarce existing financial and human resources. There is considerable scope, within existing resources, to improve effectiveness, particularly through more cost effective delivery of teaching time and reduced pupil drop-out. Opportunities to act on warning signs of cost-effectiveness provided by indicative benchmarks have not been fully identified or grasped. DFID needs to take a tougher, clearer stance on the importance of cost and service performance information; particularly on indicators of education delivery and attainment. Without such information, fully informed judgements of value for money achieved, or the cost-effective targeting of assistance, are not possible.

Recommendations

17 The following recommendations address cost-effectiveness, quality and attainment elements that feature in past and present DFID Education Strategies, but need to be better targeted and measured across the portfolio.

- a** To implement the 2010-15 strategy with more success DFID must:
- Build direct indicators of quality and attainment into internal programme objective and monitoring documents.
 - Carry out explicit diagnosis of the barriers to progress in individual countries, with analysis of the cost-effectiveness of the systems DFID intends to support, to better inform its allocation of resources.
 - Improve corporate analysis and review of country programmes, to confirm compliance with corporate objectives and to better identify and disseminate good practices.
 - Ensure it has sufficient experienced advisers to manage its increased education spending and advise Education Ministries.
- b** **DFID has focused on pupil enrolment but not on attendance (typically 20-30 per cent are absent on any given day).** DFID should work with governments to:
- Target improved levels and patterns of pupil attendance, and assess its effect on pupil performance.
 - Ensure consistent coverage from research on pupil-teacher contact time, attendance, dropout, completion and attainment, to ensure that each country programme is well-informed wherever these are major factors.

- c DFID has funded successful non-formal education initiatives to get marginalised children into education, but cost-effective approaches need wider application.** DFID should:
- Review evidence on the cost-effectiveness of non-formal education initiatives, reflecting this in its programmes and advice to governments.
 - Evaluate non-formal education innovations such as flexible, community-driven timetabling, use of local teachers, and the integration of academic and life-skills within the curriculum, assessing whether such features should be reflected in formal schooling.
- d The incomplete examination and assessment data currently available show weak attainment and little or no progress over the last five years.** DFID should in each country work with governments to:
- Promote transparency in school performance, drawing information from school inspection, assessment and examination results enabling local communities to hold schools and teachers to account.
 - Improve national examinations to better represent desired learning achievements and to enable comparison across districts and over time.
 - Support routine, sample-based student learning assessments throughout primary education, sufficient to track the outcomes of the educational initiatives that it supports.
- e Teachers are the costliest input to primary education, but DFID has not had a close enough focus on their recruitment, pay, behaviour or performance. Instructional hours delivered are often low as a proportion of those planned, and funded.** DFID country operations should:
- Ensure that its support programmes evaluate levels of teacher pay against average wages for educated people, assessing whether budgets can afford sufficient teachers to support full enrolment at 40 pupils per teacher. Influence government pay policies where analysis indicates unaffordability, or that an excessive share of education funding is captured by service providers.
 - Support functional school inspection regimes, and feed summarised results into their own interventions.
 - Work with Education Ministries to ensure that incentives and sanctions on school and teacher performance are adequate to motivate improvement.

- f** **Wide variations in input unit costs, of textbooks, classrooms and teachers, remain unexplained.** DFID should work with governments to:
- Develop use of efficiency and cost effectiveness metrics such as costs per hour of instruction delivered and received to measure teacher productivity.
 - Investigate unit cost variations to assess whether costs are as low as they should be, whilst still maintaining standards.
 - Disseminate and implement across its network the lessons from successful community contracting in India and Kenya.