

Working Group on Education Sector Analysis
UNESCO, Working Group Lead Agency

Analyses, Agendas and Priorities for Education in Africa

*A review of externally initiated,
commissioned and supported studies
of education in Africa, 1990-1994*

Summary

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Preface

Education sector studies are extensively used by funding and technical assistance agencies for identifying and justifying their aid interventions in developing countries. With the increased emphasis on sector programme and policy support as contrasted with project-focused aid, sector studies have become an essential basis for policy elaboration in education in Africa. The growing importance attached to sector analyses, which are generally commissioned or conducted by external agencies, has raised serious questions about their quality, relevance, and utility. A major concern is the limited access to and use of sector studies by agencies themselves and in particular by national personnel. This consideration was at the origin of the creation of the Working Group on Education Sector Analysis (WGESA) as a focal point for exchange of information and experience in sector analysis within the framework of the Association for the Development of African Education (DAE [formerly Donor-s to African Education]) in 1989.

In this context, the WGESA undertook an Inventory and Analytic Overview of Education Sector Studies in Africa (IAOS) as 'a means to improve the access to sector studies and the wealth of information and experience they represent. The first "Review of *Recent Sector Studies*" (October, 1989), provided an overview of studies conducted in 1985-1989. The second inventory and analytic overview carried out by the Working Group, entitled "*Analyses Agendas and Priorities for Education in Africa*" covers studies prepared from January 1990 through early 1994 and was developed to provide an overview of the current state of education sector analysis and a convenient reference to recently completed studies. It synthesizes the analyses and observations made in the different documents, their points of convergence and divergence on critical issues facing human resources development in education and training drawing primarily on 104 documents designed as studies, rather than reports or policy statements, or other papers and includes an inventory summarizing 237 sector/sub-sector studies undertaken by a wide range of national, international, and multinational institutions. Since studies often have a restricted circulation and are rarely published or mentioned in bibliographies, surveying sector studies is a labor intensive process and an almost never ending task. Therefore, the collection of documents cannot be exhaustive. Nonetheless, the IAOS does permit a reasonable overview of education sector analysis carried out in Africa.

This summary was developed to provide a synthesis of the key elements covered in the full version of the IAOS and includes a complete list of documents reviewed by country/region. The entire study was undertaken by UNESCO under the overall responsibility of the WGESA. Financing was provided by UNESCO and DAE core funds. The WGESA Secretariat acknowledges with deep gratitude the cooperation of the national institutions in Africa and the international organizations that provided the reports for this review as well as their time and support. Special thanks are extended to the DAE and members of the WGESA Steering Committee for their support throughout the entire project, to Tsagga Worku, UNESCO, for his contribution to the initial document collection, to Pia Lindquist Wong, Everett Hutt and Cynthia Cohen, and also Susan L. Bilotft, Claire Allsopp-Vaugrante and Christina Huillard, associated with UNESCO's division of Policy and Sector Analysis, who assisted in the collection, managing the documents, preparing summaries, and in the edition and production of the final report. This joint effort has permitted the Working Group to draw a more precise and complete picture of sector analysis today, both its positive contributions and short-comings, as a means for elaborating education policies in the region. This should provide a solid basis for the future activities of this Working Group.

We hope that the content of the analytic overview will be of interest to all those involved in development cooperation and research in Africa and that it will contribute to the improvement of sector analysis generally.

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Analyses, Agendas, and Priorities for Education in Africa

A Review of Externally Initiated, Commissioned, and Supported Studies of Education in Africa, 1990-1994

SUMMARY

1. Studying African Education in the Context of Foreign Assistance

African education in the final decade of the century has come to rely heavily on foreign aid. While the volume of that assistance is a very small part Africa's total spending on education, it currently plays a strategic and critical role in most African countries. With limited resources available to address pressing needs and a widening demand, education aid agencies look to studies of African education to inform, guide, and justify their support programs.

In practice, education sector studies are both very important and very uneven. While some offer solid contributions to education policy and programmatic decisions, others seem superficial, uncritical, and unpersuasive. As well, to date there have been at best weak links between those commissioned studies and other studies of education in Africa.

The principal focus of this analytic review is the education sector studies initiated, commissioned, and supported by external aid agencies. Its principal task concern to make those studies, including an overview of their approaches and findings, more accessible to those involved in education policy and programs. Its principal objectives are to facilitate learning from experiences in diverse settings and to improve the quality and extend the utility of education sector studies. The general expectation is that the broader dissemination of information—both substantive and procedural—and the cross-pollination of academic and applied studies will improve the quality of research of all sorts, foster dialogue among aid agency personnel, researchers, and policy makers, and thereby contribute to the development of a more solid foundation for education reform and policy making more generally.

The report includes an overview of those education sector studies, summary tables indicating the number and types of studies collected and reviewed, a review of the major themes found in those studies, including points of convergence and divergence, and an explorations of the roles of education sector studies in setting Africa's education agenda and in the general process of education reform. The appended lists and inventory include all documents received, organized by country/region, sponsoring agency and document title.

Circumstances warrant treating the studies of South Africa separately. The unique and distinct characteristics of the South African situation and the extraordinarily rapid expansion of interest and work in South Africa risk obscuring important themes and gaps in the studies of the rest of Africa. In addition, although South Africa is only one of Africa's more than fifty countries, and although its population is 5-10% of Africa's total, nearly one-fourth of the externally initiated and supported education studies undertaken in the 1990s focused on South Africa. To have included them in this analytic review would therefore have resulted in a discussion dominated by the unique South African experience. An earlier pilot study, *After Apartheid, What? A Review of Externally Initiated, Commissioned, and Supported Studies of Education in South Africa* (prepared by Joel Samoff (Paris: UNESCO, November 1994) and summarized in the full report), reviewed the studies of South African education.

2. Africa Education Sector Studies

What, then, is a *sector study*? While all involved in agency-commissioned education research seem to be confident both that they know what is and what is not a sector study and that they can readily distinguish good and bad sector studies, they do not all agree on either score. Indeed, even the specification of what is the "education sector" differs among the agencies and authors involved in these studies.

For some, the education sector includes all education and training activities. In other settings, however, the education sector is understood not to include much of vocational training (deemed to be the responsibility of employers and their organizations, not educators), early childhood care and development (assigned to health and community welfare institutions), political education (the province of political groups), and more. Nor is there general agreement among the foreign assistance agencies on the breadth of an education sector study. Some studies do seek to address all education activities, while others limit their attention to formal schooling. Still others have an even more limited focus, concerned, for example, with curriculum, or textbooks, or teacher education, or education statistics. At the same time, some reflect a broad notion of human resource development, asserting that education reform—and thus the studies intended to guide that reform—must address nutrition, home situations, general health, and other dimensions of life that condition and constrain the learning process.

Just as there are several different, and not entirely consistent, understandings of what is an education sector study so there is a broad range of approaches deemed appropriate for undertaking those studies. Notwithstanding the explicit guidelines for sector study preparation developed by a few agencies, the actual conduct of Africa education sector studies reflects different understandings of what is to be done and how that is to be accomplished.

Currently the most common strategy involves a study team selected and paid by the commissioning agency, generally led by an expatriate and often including one or more researchers from the country to be studied. Almost always on a tight schedule, the team convenes for an initial briefing and preparatory work, allocates a few weeks to document review and consultations within the country, and then prepares and submits its report. After agency and country reviews, that report may or may not be revised.

The variants are many. Some study teams are large, while others include only one or two people. The time spent in the country studied varies from extended to very little. Some reports draw on the results of multiple sub-studies. The documents reviewed also indicate wide variation in the extent and nature of local participation in education sector studies. In some settings, apparently the sponsoring agency specifies what is to be done, while in others the terms of reference are set through extensive dialogue and consultation between the external agency and the government. The reports themselves suggest while most often local researchers contribute to the final report, very rarely are they its principal authors.

Amidst this wide range of variation, the education sector study process continues to evolve. Older approaches are modified and new strategies emerge. Among the new initiatives has been UNESCO's effort to provide technical assistance at a very early stage, intended to assist national decision makers and educators in their determination of exactly what is problematic in the education sector and how studies should be organized.

Developing a broad and inclusive survey required collecting a wide range of studies of education in Africa commissioned by external aid agencies. Currently, there is no definitive bibliography or list of those studies. As well, many of those studies have restricted circulation, have not been exposed to systematic professional or public review, are not cited in the academic literature, and will never be formally published. Accordingly, drawing on the lists assembled for a similar survey undertaken in 1989 and on the roster maintained by the Association for the Development of African Education (DAE), a large number of national and international agencies were asked to provide copies of Africa education sector studies they had initiated, commissioned, or supported since 1990. With few exceptions, ultimately it was the agencies themselves that determined which documents would be provided. A sustained effort yielded 237 documents for review. Still, this collection is surely incomplete. Additional searching over a longer period would likely unearth other reports and studies. Systematic examination of many of the locally prepared studies of African education might reveal partial or total external funding. Of course, new studies continue to be prepared.

The documents collected are of several sorts. To facilitate the analysis, it proved useful to categorize them, accommodating the different meanings attached to "education sector" and "study."

The scope of these studies has been categorized as *general* (address more than one country), *multi-sector* (extend beyond education), *education sector* (focus specifically on education), *sub-sector* (concerned with one of the principal education sub-divisions), and *special focus* (consider a more narrowly specified element or dimension of education). A careful review of the entire set of documents suggested that their type be categorized as *studies*, *reports*, or *papers*, though here too the boundaries remain ambiguous.

Just over half the documents received (28/52 for South Africa and 104/185 for the rest of Africa) were categorized as studies. Of those, one-fifth of the Africa studies (21/104) and one-tenth of the South Africa studies (3/28) addressed the entire education sector. To put that somewhat differently 11% of the Africa documents (21/185) and 5% of the South Africa documents (3/52) can be termed education sector studies in the fullest sense of that term.

3. Themes

By the 1990s, studies of African education initiated, commissioned, and supported by external assistance agencies may have become more numerous and more influential than studies undertaken by academic researchers, both national and expatriate, and reported in the published literature. The context for these documents is the foreign aid relationship. Notwithstanding the broad range of approaches and organization in the entire set of documents, most studies are quite similar in method and format. Their basic purpose is to provide grounding and perhaps guidance for foreign assistance, whether to a specific project, or to a more general program, or to the entire education sector. It is thus not surprising that these documents have much in common.

3.1 Points of Convergence

As in their counterparts of the late 1980s, the similarities among these studies—undertaken in very different settings by different agencies for different purposes—are striking. For convenience, common themes are listed here in schematic form, though of course all themes do not appear in every document, and there are overlaps and intersections among the observations, inferences, ideas, and recommendations listed separately here.

- A. The most common refrain is crisis. Education in Africa, at all levels and in all its forms, is in dire straits. With few exceptions, both schools and learning have deteriorated, and the situation is continuing to worsen.
- B. Not only is there crisis, but national authorities seem to be unable to deal with it effectively.
- C. Education quality has seriously deteriorated in most African countries. In these documents, that generally means that examination scores and teachers' qualifications have declined.
- D. Given their context, it is not surprising that most of these documents focus major attention on issues of education finance. Particularly concerned with limited, sometimes declining, resources, they generally emphasize reducing expenditures and using available funds more efficiently.
- E. That focus on finance helps to highlight the choices that education policy makers must make as well as the costs and some of the consequences of those choices.
- F. At the same time, as in the education sector studies of the late 1980s, the focus on finance also tends to eclipse attention to learning, though that receives more attention than it did in the earlier set. Still, rare is the document in which learning features prominently as the central concern. Even more rare is the study where enhanced and extended learning—something more than improved examination results—is the principal object of a proposed reform or the primary measure of its success.
- G. Rehabilitation of education institutions, which have deteriorated during the period of crisis, should have a high priority.
- H. Central authority should be reduced through decentralization and regionalization.

- I. Achieving universal access to basic education should have a very high priority both because of its general desirability and because investing in basic education yields a higher return to society than spending at other levels,
- J. There continues to be a mismatch between curricular emphases and orientations on the one hand and labor market needs on the other. Although a few studies are skeptical about the possibility and cost-effectiveness of tuning schooling to the future shape of the work place, the majority voice continues to criticize what it terms the irrelevance of the curriculum.
- K. Education systems nearly everywhere are managed poorly and administered inefficiently.
- L. While there has been great progress in increasing the admission of female students, their attrition rate remains significantly higher than that of their male counterparts.
- M. Notwithstanding the diversity of their settings and specific concerns, many of these documents offer the same set of recommendations: reduce the central government role in providing education; decentralize responsibilities, including some funding, to authorities at regional, district, and school levels; increase school fees, generally with more money retained at the local level or individual school; expand the role for private schools; and reduce direct support to students, especially at tertiary level.

A second set of recommendations appeared frequently in these documents, though they were not as widespread as those listed above: introduce double shifts to reduce the expenditure per student; establish multi-grade classrooms, especially in sparsely populated areas, to reduce the number of teachers required; within an education reform or improvement strategy, assign a high priority to instructional materials, especially textbooks; in most circumstances, favor in-service over pre-service teacher education; and eliminate, or at least reduce substantially, government spending on students' boarding and transport by making them parental responsibilities, with financial assistance for a small number of students judged most needy.

The commonality of approach across these documents is itself striking.

- N. While there are some exceptions, most of the research and assessment in these studies reflects a medical metaphor. It is diagnostic and then prescriptive. That is, beginning with the observation or assumption that the education system is in some important way unhealthy study authors explore the symptoms and seek to diagnose the systemic illness. The specific findings of course vary from country to country and setting to setting. Even where the list of study authors suggests significant local (that is, national) participation, the perspective is generally that of the clinician, detached from the subject being scrutinized. Observation is followed by diagnosis, prognosis, and prescription. Where necessary the patient, that is, the country, must be required to swallow the bitter medicine, assured by the experts that its effects will be curative and restorative rather than debilitating or destructive.

Like the documents of the late 1980s, these studies also converge on what they do not address.

- O. Few documents devote much attention to higher education, perhaps reflecting the effort to redirect energy and resources toward basic education for all.
- P. In general, these studies are unselfcritical and inattentive to issues of theory, approach, and method. That is, they commonly assume that a particular approach or method is appropriate without explicit justification or support, for example, rate of return analysis.
- Q. Similarly, many other constructs that recur throughout these documents are used uncritically, sometimes with the effect of treating a matter of education policy as a technical or administrative concern.
- R. Most of these studies include a note pointing to gaps and other problems in the available education data. Yet surprisingly few of these studies address data problems directly, either by collecting their own data or by developing strategies for working with seriously flawed data. Nor do most studies integrate into their findings the very large probable margins of error in most of the available education data.

3.2 Points of Divergence

While the convergence among these documents is striking, they diverge in several important respects. A few stand out.

- A. These reports differ sharply on the specification of their analytic framework. On first reading, most studies appear to be largely descriptive, or descriptive with an appended analytic commentary. That is, they begin by describing the formal education system (or the part of it with which they are concerned) in what have come to be standard terms: enrollment, progress (selection, repetition, attrition), completion, curricular emphases, staffing, facilities, and expenditures. As seems appropriate in a particular case, they highlight special elements, for example, insufficient textbooks or high repetition rates or the low qualifications of many teachers. Having characterized the education system in this way, most reports then go on to identify what they regard as major problems and high priority needs. Problems and needs then specify more or less explicitly an intervention strategy.

In this common approach, the values and assumptions that guide the basic description remain unstated. Why, for example, *prior to the research*, are the different enrollment and completion rates of Christians and Muslims deemed sufficiently important to report in some studies but not others? Similarly, *prior to the research* some studies *assume* the importance of regional inequalities and socio-economic stratification and use them as major explanatory tools while they receive relatively little attention in the framework for description employed in other studies. The process of determining what is considered (by people within or outside the country) problematic clearly shapes the framework for diagnosis and thus at least in part precedes it. Suppose, for example, that an examination of a particular education system found a very steep education pyramid, with sharply restricted selection at several stages and very few people who reach the highest level. Is that a problem to be resolved or evidence that the education system is functioning effectively? *Clearly, what is or is not problematic cannot be determined from the basic information itself.* Nor is there always, or even usually, consensus among those involved in education on which problems are most pressing or ought to have the highest priority for financial and other resources.

Some studies do begin with an explicit statement of what is regarded as the problematic situation that led to the study itself. While reports of this sort may not indicate clearly how the problem was specified, that they begin with a clear sense of problem enables them to use that perceived problem to organize the description. If high attrition rates are deemed to be the pressing problem, then elements of the education system expected to affect attrition (for example, school fees) require more extensive attention than those that are expected to have little or no effect on attrition for most students (availability of braille textbooks). Indeed, the concern with attrition may lead to collecting some information that might otherwise not be included in a generic description of the education system, for example, distance between home and school, or the relationship between the school calendar and seasonal migrant labor. Studies of this sort can then move from their problem-oriented description to an analysis of alternative explanations for causes of the problem to recommendations that are tightly linked to description and analysis. As a result, their suggestions are less likely to appear to be the application of a standard formula or to be perceived as the idiosyncratic thinking of particular agencies or consultants.

Descriptions can never encompass everything or address all elements with equal emphasis. Nor can description be a neutral process, since it involves selecting information and assigning priorities. Where that selection and assignment are explicit, readers are much better able to determine the utility of the information and its role in specific recommendations. In the same way, where that selection and assignment are not explicitly set out, unstated values and assumptions, more than the actual state of the education system, may be the primary sources for particular proposals or loan conditions.

- B. While most of the documents reviewed are apparently the result of relatively brief studies by an expatriate-led team, some reflect a more extensive consultative process. From the information available in the documents themselves, the common pattern continues to rely on intense activity by a small group of consultants, usually including a brief visit to the country or setting involved. More than in the 1980s, those groups regularly include local researchers, though almost never as the senior consultant or document author. Nearly all note interviews with education and other officials and with others who have some role in the subject of study.

Some studies, however, seem to reflect sustained dialogue that goes well beyond relatively brief interviews. They suggest as well continuing discussion with organizations that represent important education constituencies that are little visible in the majority of the documents reviewed, for example, teachers' unions. A dialogue of this sort seems to be most common in countries where there has been a national education initiative, for example, the inclusive national meetings or assemblies (for example, États-Généraux) held in several countries. That broad education debate itself becomes not only the focus of but also part of the study of the education system, including problem specification, analysis, recommendations, and ultimately implementation. These documents also manifest a greater effort to integrate analyses of different sorts, including earlier studies, published articles, and specifically commissioned research. Beyond their explicit references to that integration, these documents regularly include bibliographies of relevant work.

In a few cases, in addition to this national debate, these studies reflect an on-going discussion between national educators and the external agency, apparently most often UNESCO and UNDP. Where that has occurred, the major education sector study is the culmination rather than the beginning of the dialogue. That is, only after extensive discussion and interaction is it deemed timely or desirable or even possible to specify the purpose and terms of reference for a broad sector study.

- C. As noted, many of these studies report that the quality of African education has declined seriously in recent years. For the most part, examination scores, completion rates, and admission to education programs at the next level are used as the appropriate measures of quality. The limited availability of instructional materials, teachers' low qualifications, and overcrowded classes are seen as both indicators and causes of declining quality. Recommended improvement strategies focus on those and other presumed causes.

In that approach, most studies accept the basic structure of the education system, largely as inherited from the colonial era. A few studies, however, challenge that organization, insisting that improving quality requires fundamentally restructuring the education environment. There must be a shift, they argue, from teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction, a reduction in the heavy influence of examinations, an increase in teachers' roles in setting and monitoring curriculum, greater use of local languages, and more.

3.3 Education For All

Education for all, understood to mean universal access to basic education, features centrally in many of these documents. For the most part, that is addressed in terms of expanded access to formal schooling, especially for those segments of the population currently underrepresented. The principal problem is understood to be the gap between the expansion needed and available resources. Much of the discussion is therefore concerned with reducing per-student costs. While the specific recommendations of course vary among the different settings studied, the most common proposals are double shifts, redeploying teachers, employing instructional personnel with lower qualifications, increased student fees and community contributions, privatization, reallocations from post-primary education, and increasing the student: teacher ratio. Some of these documents report significant progress toward education for all, while others seem less optimistic about the larger goal.

Several gaps in this discussion, however, are puzzling. First, in many documents the prominence of education for all seems more an effort by the external agency to persuade the government

of its value than a reflection of the government's own priorities. Second, there is relatively little discussion of strategies other than full-time formal schooling for achieving education for all. Perhaps related to that, third, there is little explicit attention to the appropriate educational environments for unschooled older children and younger and older adults (a problem that appears in sharp relief in the South African setting). Fourth, there is little evidence that the external agencies have effectively coordinated their efforts and finance to achieve education for all in a particular country or to calculate the additional funds needed and then to assure them for a decade or more into the future. Fifth, although nearly all the documents reviewed accept and reiterate the view that government expenditures on primary education yield greater societal benefits than spending at other levels, the methodology used to reach that conclusion apparently remains unpersuasive to decision makers in many countries.

3.4 Females in Education

A striking difference between the documents of the late 1980s and those of only a few years later is the extent of the attention to females' education. Essentially no study ignores the topic. Most note increased female access and at the same time higher rates of attrition among female students, with the result that in most countries there are relatively few females at the highest levels of the education system. Several focused studies address this issue directly

The most common approach is to seek to identify explanatory factors for lower enrollment or higher attrition, both in and out of school. The candidate causes are by now well known: parental attitudes, gender-differentiated expectations for future income (based at least in part on gender-differentiated salary scales), females' labor and household responsibilities, the absence of role models at home and in school, explicit and implicit discouragement for pursuing particular courses of study, parents' level of education, family religious and moral precepts, and more. Much of this commentary talks of bringing women into the development process.

Some analysts, however, stress that as primary producers of agriculture and reproducers of the family women are already at the core of the development process. In that view, the problem is not one of malintegration but rather the relations of power and authority. From this perspective, since schools reflect the social order in which they function, it is not surprising that societal gender distinctions infiltrate and orient the schools. That is, to confront gender inequality requires not so much identifying individual causative factors but reconstructing social, and therefore economic and political, relations. In this approach, schools must function not to incorporate females more efficiently into an inegalitarian society but rather schools must become locations and agents of social transformation. This understanding of the problem and approaches to it, though forcefully presented in the general literature on African development, is with few exceptions little evident in the studies of African education.

3.5 Quality and Quantity

Many of these documents assert, explicitly or implicitly that there is a necessary tradeoff between quality and quantity. While they insist on quantitative expansion at the primary level, necessary to achieve education for all, most studies have a clear tilt toward what they characterize as quality over quantity.

Measuring education quality, in Africa as elsewhere, is problematic. The difficulties stem both from divergent understandings of what education is and what it is to accomplish and from problems of measurement. Since examinations play a very prominent role in African education, it is common to take examination results as the principal, or sometime sole, measure of education quality. The sector studies reflect continuing attention to these issues and some experimentation with alternative assessment strategies. Still, the measures of education quality most commonly used emphasize achievement and information acquisition and rely heavily on examination scores and degrees, certificates, and other credentials earned. Learning as process, information use rather than acquisition, concept formation, development of analytic skills, and the like are apparently only rarely included in

quality measures. Other expectations of the education system, for example developing a common national identity preparing young people for effective citizenship, nurturing cooperative skills, reducing social inequalities, and resolving conflict, are included in quality measures even less often.

In their own national statements nearly all African countries link quality and quantity in education. They point to the legacy of inequality they inherited at independence and to their commitment to an egalitarian future. From that perspective, access to and success in school must function to reduce, not entrench, inequality. In this understanding, schools that effectively exclude, or do not serve well, particular segments of the population cannot be considered to be of high quality, irrespective of their examination results. While education may be selective, it cannot claim to achieve high quality if it perpetuates discrimination on grounds other than ability and accomplishment. In this view, the notion of quality must itself include the quantitative expansion required to redress the discrimination of the past. In this understanding, then, quality quantity and equality are linked and common goals, not alternatives.

3.6 Institutional Capacity and Capacity Building

Many of the documents reviewed point to severe problems in education management and administration, often asserting that institutions and individuals cannot operate the education system effectively.

What is puzzling here is the persistence of observations of this sort over the past three decades. Limited high level skills were identified as a problem in all African countries at independence. Since then, Africa has been awash in training needs studies and training projects and programs of all sorts. Training courses and institutions, both general and specialized, both shorter and longer term, have proliferated. Yet still those who study African education point to a deficiency of managerial and administrative skills. There seems to be little systematic study of why such extensive training efforts have apparently not created a surplus rather than a shortage of relevant skills. Until that is explained, there is little reason to expect that additional recommendations of the same sort will significantly alter the situation. Equally puzzling is the limited attention to another sort of capacity building: the Africanization of the conduct of the sector studies themselves.

4. Whose Agenda? How Constructed?

Like the 1980s documents, these studies continue to reflect a disjunction between the issues apparently deemed most important by the external agencies and the objectives articulated by African governments and educators. It remains the case that few of these studies focus on fostering an inquiring and critical orientation among learners, eliminating discrimination and reducing elitism, promoting national unity preparing young people for the rights and obligations of citizenship, or developing among learners a strong sense of individual and collective competence, self-reliance, and self-confidence. Yet these objectives have featured prominently in statements of African Ministers of Education over the past three decades.

These sorts of objectives are of course more difficult to quantify and measure than, say, building classrooms or increasing the availability of instructional materials. To ignore them entirely, however, is to delete them from the education agenda that is reflected by and increasingly set in Africa's education sector studies.

Dependence on foreign funds has increased the external influence on the national education agenda. The most direct form of that influence is conditions attached to particular aid arrangements. As well, the funding agencies have often become direct participants in national agenda setting discussions, especially where they have eclipsed the roles of the technical assistance organizations. The education sector studies highlight several other paths of influence, including the specification of what is problematic in a particular education system, the uncritical use of particular analytic constructs and tools, and privileging and ignoring particular voices (for example, listening intently to the finance ministry and not hearing at all the teachers' union).

A recent UNESCO initiative has sought to depart from this general orientation. In projects developed in Africa and Southeast Asia UNESCO has structured relationships with national educators and policy makers to organize in-depth participatory sector analysis. Briefly this strategy begins with a diagnosis of the current situation, proceeds to the elaboration of a national strategy including feasibility assessments of policy options, and the development of action plans for policy implementation, and concludes with a comprehensive report, generally including specialized sub-sector and thematic papers, that is then used for internal policy discussions, resource mobilization efforts, and perhaps the preparation of a national development plan. To institutionalize the participatory character of this approach, national officials, both within and outside the education sector, assume major responsibilities for undertaking studies, gathering evidence, interpreting results, and organizing project meetings. Representatives of non-governmental groups concerned with education are also to be involved in these activities. As designed, this approach requires both participation by a much larger number of people than is common in education sector studies and a much longer time horizon.

5. Transforming Education, Transforming Society

Education sector studies are intended to contribute to the improvement of education and thus to the quality of life and development in Africa more generally. Notwithstanding their varying quality, their rapid proliferation reinforces the link between systematic research and informed policy decisions. Their common concern with education finance has served to insist on greater attention to public policy choices, to efficient and cost-effective management, and to accountability in education decision making. As Africa's educators have themselves developed greater expertise in these areas, their credibility and legitimacy with their own finance ministry and with international agencies has increased. In particular circumstances it seems clear that externally initiated education sector studies have informed and strengthened policy discussions and decisions.

Assessing whether or not those studies have contributed more broadly to improving education and facilitating national development, however, is beyond the scope of a brief overview. At the same time, it is useful to note several ways in which the studies themselves—their conception, assumptions, organization, orientation, conduct, and presentation—may function in practice to limit their utility. Highlighting these issues here is of course itself intended to inform and enrich the discussion of education in contemporary Africa and thereby contribute to its improvement.

5.1 Inattention to Context and Feasibility

These documents support and extend the observation in a recent World Bank review of its own education sector analyses that most such studies are inattentive to context and feasibility. A common result is recommendations that may seem plausible within the limited purview of a particular study but that prove to be quite unworkable on the ground. For example, many of the studies reviewed recommend that local education and political authorities assume or be assigned all sorts of new responsibilities. Most of those studies, however, do not explore whether or not those local authorities have the capacity to undertake the new tasks, are interested in becoming involved in those activities, or have sufficient political maneuvering room and leverage to address them effectively.

5.2 Accessibility, Transparency and Accountability

It is increasingly understood that effective implementation of development programs requires what has come to be termed "ownership." People everywhere are much more likely to work to make successful those programs that they consider their own, rather than initiatives imposed on them by someone else. Despite that understanding, these studies remain generally inaccessible outside a very limited circle. Most often, those charged with implementation see themselves as consumers, not owners.

Most of these documents, however, reflect an outsider's perspective. The terminology used is both instructive and formative. Reforms are termed *interventions*, that is insertions from outside rather than initiatives from within. How are African educators to become owners of those reforms when they are the objects of the surgery, not the surgeons? Education is termed a *deliver-y system*. not an organic process in which learners are the doers rather than the receivers. How do recipients become owners?

Much of the writing on African development in the 1990s focuses on transparency and accountability. Education sector studies, however, remain largely opaque, more accountable to parliaments and program officers in the North Atlantic than to educators and other learners in Africa.

5.3 Little or No Critical Review

Transparency and accountability are also prominent in the academic community. Exposure to critical review is widely understood to be an essential strategy for improving the quality of research and rejecting unsupported findings and inferences. Yet most often the research reported in these studies—research used to justify particular courses of action—remains sheltered from peer examination and evaluation.

These studies are uncritical in several important respects. They rarely note the debates about the key constructs they employ or justify the use of those constructs. Almost never do they note research that has come to different conclusions or that supports the opposite recommendation. Indeed, these studies seem to pay little attention to the results or consequences of three decades of recommendations of the sort that they continue to offer. If the analysis in earlier education sector studies was as clear and as correct as its presenters suggested, why do the problems identified then still seem so intractable? And if the earlier analysis and recommendations were not implemented or did not achieve the intended results, why expect similar analysis and advice in the 1990s to have a different outcome? Where there is evidence of attention to the sequels to earlier recommendations, there may be an inclination to over-generalize the interpretation of limited experiences.

While the standard academic peer review process may not be workable in this context, there is little evidence in these studies of efforts to develop an alternative strategy for insuring effective, rapid, and timely review by people with relevant expertise and experience. Even the occasional trenchant critiques of education sector studies by the aid agencies seem not to have had significant impact on the studies themselves.

5.4 The Aid Relationship

Essentially none of these studies addresses the aid relationship itself. In general they do not explore the nature and consequences of the increasing reliance on external assistance to support reform and even basic services in African education. Nor do they assess the empirical evidence on the relationship between aid and the quality of education in Africa.

As many observers, including several of the most prominent assistance agencies, have noted, foreign aid may foster an outflow rather than an inflow of capital. That occurs in several ways, of which the two most prominent are the purchase of products and services from the aid-providing country and debt repayment. What of education aid to Africa? Are there cases or countries where the net flow has been outward? How much of disbursed aid actually reaches its designated recipients? What are the long term consequences of becoming so heavily aid-dependent that it is impossible to conceive of new initiatives, or even of meeting the recurrent budget, without regular infusions of foreign assistance? In what ways has that increasing reliance on external aid affected education decision making, from general policies, to priorities, to specific programs? While the answers to these questions may not please one or both partners in the aid relationship, they are likely to help to clarify why some programs are favored over others and perhaps to explain why some programs seem much more successful than others.

Cause and effect are very difficult to establish clearly in education, which is an intricate web of processes, some integrally related and others distantly connected. Mapping those links is a frustrating and usually contentious undertaking, especially where the concern goes between ostensibly standardized measures like examinations to explore learning and its consequences. It is therefore not surprising that the relationships between aid-supported curricular and instructional reforms on the one hand and specific developmental outcomes on the other are complex and difficult to discern. Confounding and compounding factors are numerous and often not readily apparent. The links between education and development more generally are still harder to establish,

However daunting the challenge, though, research on the education sector must inquire about what education assistance programs have accomplished, at both the smaller and larger scales. Yet, important as these and related questions are, with very few exceptions the authors of Africa's education sector studies generally do not address them.

Foreign aid is after all a relationship, in its most productive form a partnership for development cooperation. To fail to address the provider side of that relationship is to assume that whatever the granting or lending agency does is reasonable and beneficial and that if there are problems, the explanations must lie on the side of the recipient. Those assumptions themselves become obstacles to an effective partnership. The challenge, then, is to recognize that foreign assistance agencies have become actors in African education and to study their roles collectively and individually, including both what has worked and what has not.

5.5 Dialogue?

It seems clear to most of the education community that effective reform requires agendas and initiatives with strong local roots and the broad participation of those with a stake in outcomes, including not only officials but also students, parents, teachers, and communities. In that sense, education reform is not an event or a moment of change but a *process* in which the principal challenge is to expand the circle of involvement. Unless the beneficiaries of the reform become its bearers, it is likely to be stillborn. For external agencies to support that process, they must conceive their role in terms of development cooperation, rather than providing philanthropy or determining directions. Many education sector studies, however, function in practice to undermine and discourage, rather than foster and facilitate dialogue.

Many agencies, and especially the World Bank, are currently sending a very mixed message in this regard. At times they claim to be moving away from conditions and imposed expectations and toward greater African autonomy and decision making. Aware that technical assistance to Africa can impede rather than promote development, aid agencies assert that their support will be directed toward building Africa's capacity to help itself, including increased reliance on studies designed and commissioned within Africa. At the same time, the World Bank and other agencies defend conditional lending, both to promote what they regard as desirable financial and managerial practices and to support broader social objectives, for example, eliminating or reducing gender discrimination. Indeed, not infrequently they project themselves as the ally of the disadvantaged, more effective in addressing poverty and discrimination than African governments.

A few education sector studies reflect a strong commitment to *development cooperation*, incorporating the advisory role of external agencies into a sustained and mutually respectful dialogue among people who listen as well as speak. Many education sector studies, however, function in practice not to foster and facilitate dialogue, but to undermine and discourage it. Seeking to provide clear and firm findings, they announce and pronounce. They set terms. They declare. Sheltered by specialized language and the strictures of confidentiality, they remain largely inaccessible outside a very small circle. Though they talk about capacity building, far too often the sector study process, especially its inclination to preach and declare, even dictate, rather than listen, is itself incapacitating.

This observation highlights the relationship between the content and the process of development advice. It would be incorrect to conclude that external advice is necessarily or even usually misguided. No one doubts that both educators and countries have a good deal to learn from each

other. The ways that advice is transmitted, however, may undermine its utility and effectively preclude its implementation. Until there is a much more substantial independent local role in determining the agenda, scope, and methodology of education sector studies and in conducting those studies, and until their recommendations result from critical review and inclusive discussions, the helpful advice sector studies include is unlikely to prove very useful.

There have been promising initiatives. In some countries a national assembly or convocation has provided a setting for a wide range of interests to present their views and demands. Where that has been effective in reconciling or accommodating conflicting perspectives, there may be a somewhat stronger base for developing an education agenda that reflects those national interests and that can be used to inform and guide the foreign aid relationship. In a few settings there has apparently been a much more extensive process of dialogue and consultation, with shared responsibility for determining what is to be studied and how. The research itself has been undertaken largely by local researchers, often including education ministry officials and other practitioners. The specification of what is problematic is then refined in terms of the initial research. The refined specification in turn informs the continuing research. The detailed sector study comes much later in the process and is almost entirely the responsibility of local educators and decision makers.

These examples do not describe a universally appropriate or preferable strategy. Rather, they suggest first that there are alternatives to what is currently the most common pattern and second that understanding the education sector study as a process is feasible and manageable. Those alternatives assign to the external agencies not the responsibility for deciding what is to be done but instead supporting a national debate and analysis of what is problematic and how to address it.

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