Aid for Self-Help Effort?
A Sustainable Alternative Route to Basic Education in Northern Ghana

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Abstract

Northern Ghana presents an interesting case of the limitations of the conventional school system in reaching underserved and deprived populations with basic education. Due to the peculiar nature of its demographic characteristics and the socio-economic challenges that confront this area of Ghana, conventional school systems are unable to thrive and make an impact in remote areas. Many of these communities are sparsely populated and scattered making distance a hindrance to school. attendance. A major barrier to access and participation is also the cost. In poor deprived communities whether or not children attend school usually depends on the direct or indirect costs to families. Direct costs arises from schooling accessories such as uniforms, books and writing materials whilst the indirect costs are largely in the form of income lost from the child's potential employment or contribution to household income through direct labor. Yet another obstacle is the official school calendar which usually conflicts with families' economic activities to which the child is a crucial contributor. A growing number of NGOs and civil society organizations are introducing basic education initiatives that have been adjusted to reflect these demographic and socio-economic realities. Many of the NGOs try to promote the spirit of self-help efforts among poor rural people using strategies that encourage community participation and ownership of the basic education initiative. This paper describes and analyses the effort of one such NGO education programme known as the "School for Life" (SFL) in Northern Ghana. The paper examines the extent to which the activities of this organization are actually promoting self-help efforts in sustaining an aid initiated basic education programme. The acid test for aid effectiveness is what happens when it phases out - in that case is the initiative sustainable? The paper argues that for true sustainability to be achieved there is the need for a concerted working relationship between the aid programme provider and local government institutions because of the potential benefits that this relationship can bring in sustaining the programme once external support ends. Finally, using the SFL programme as an example, it argues that the key to promoting greater participation and commitment among rural communities towards basic education, is by showing that it can actually open up access to higher levels of education without conflicting with the socio-cultural and economic activities of the society.

Introduction

Education development in many low income countries is characterized by a top-down approach whereby a national system of education is designed at the top and implemented throughout the country. There is often not much consideration given to the special needs of certain sections of the population who live under very different and difficult socio-economic and demographic environments that make a uniform education system unproductive and unattractive. Unlike the situation in many advanced countries where the socio-economic environment and infrastructure for equitable delivery of education programmes is much more even, for many countries in the developing world especially Africa, there can be very uneven conditions especially in rural areas. For example, the qualified teacher demand and supply situation can be very precarious. There are many instances of teacher shortage and absenteeism in rural communities that have been attributed to the harsh living and working conditions there (Hedges 2003) and which is a leading cause of dysfunctional schools in these areas. Acute poverty is another condition that is known to undermine participation rates in rural areas. Poor people are particularly affected by the direct and indirect costs of basic education. Direct costs arise from schooling accessories such as uniforms, books and writing materials and indirect costs are due largely to the form of income lost from the child's potential employment or contribution to household income through direct labor. All of these are major obstacles confronting conventional approaches to basic education delivery in rural and deprived populations in Africa.

There is also the problem of state education systems unable to adapt their operations, programmes and structures to face and address the challenges of access to quality basic education in poor and hard to reach areas of society. Here the principle 'one size does not fit all' is relevant. Educational systems in Africa operate with such blindness to the challenges of providing quality basic education to deprived areas in their society that they have become simply incapable of adapting their operations and programmes to reflect local realities. Why is it, one would ask, that it is poor rural communities with all the obstacles that confront them that are expected to make adjustments and sacrifices to meet the requirements of formal schooling, and not schools that need to adapt to overcome these obstacles?

The inability of many governments to institutionalize strategies that respond satisfactorily to the challenges of improving access to quality basic education in poor deprived areas has provided the *raison d' être* for NGOs and other aid organizations to jump in with a host of interventions. These organizations have the advantage of adequate funding but are also able to integrate contextual understanding into programme delivery to meet the needs of poor communities. Within the last two decades, alternative routes to basic education established with aid money have mushroomed all over developing countries, particularly in Africa where the strategy has always been to improve basic literacy and numeracy skills of children with the local community playing an active management and supervisory role (see Miller-Grandvaux & Yoder 2002).

However, using NGO and other donor funds to provide alternative routes to basic

education for the poor comes with its difficulties and unintended consequences. First of all, the alternative routes tend to be short-term initiatives and crucially the efforts do not link very well to the formal system, making many of them a dead end (World Bank 2003). There is also evidence that many of such schools are unable to engage in productive collaborations with local authorities to sustain financial and programmatic commitments that are critical for their continued existence (CARE Ghana 2003) which often leads to a dependency on the providers that is not sustainable. But also the way in which some aid-assisted projects are constructed can effectively replace the will of local people and create this unsustainable dependency (Ellerman 2002). The frustrations many aid programme providers face when dealing with weak local government institutions has led some aid programmes to find ways around them to ensure that aid-funded services reach poor people. But as is correctly noted by the World Development Report (2003), such an action simply assigns the project to history when the external funding dries up because local government institutions simply ignore them once they are completed.

There is no doubt that external aid assistance can play an important role in motivating self-help efforts among poor rural communities especially in situations where poor people have little or no collective active capacity, voice and resources to initiate a process of change. The challenge really is how to make aid-assisted education interventions work in such a way as to motivate self-help effort and avoid creating a dependency relationship.

In this paper I describe and analyze the efforts of one aid-assisted programme: the "School for Life" (SFL) Basic Education initiative in Northern Ghana which appears to be operating with a philosophy that seeks to make local participation and ownership an important ingredient in sustaining the programme. The discussion focuses on how this aid programme is delivered and analyses its potential for promoting sustainable self-help efforts at local level. The paper also posits a critical question: what strategies and relationships are necessary to ensure that aid programmes work without exerting a corrupting influence in terms of aid recipients becoming aid dependent and therefore less autonomous?

Northern Ghana[1]: Context and Characteristics

The Northern region of Ghana account for almost a third of Ghana's land mass and is inhabited by about 10% of its population, representing a population density of less than 25 people per square kilometre. The Upper West region accounts for only 3% of the country's population and only 17.5% of the population can be classified as urban. Population density per square kilometre in Upper West is 31 persons as against the national figure of 79. With a harsh climate and poor vegetation, the people are dispersed, nomadic and deprived. Poverty is endemic in Northern Ghana with people facing formidable challenges with regards to water, food and employment opportunities. The community context with its severe lean season, low production and storage facilities contribute to the basic food security problems.

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[1] Northern Ghana is used to refer to three regions: Upper West, Upper East and Northern regions.

Studies on child poverty indicate that a lot of children in Northern Ghana fend for themselves by engaging in economic activities to support their basic food and nutritional requirements (Casely-Hayford 2002). Also a vast majority of children supplement their family's income through the provision of their labour in economic activities (e.g. farming) which makes participation in an education programme often a luxury.

National statistics indicate that the literacy rate among adults in Northern Ghana is lower than 5% and less than 40% of children up to 14 years attend school. This leaves about 60% of children out of school, most of whom are girls. Thus majority of children do not complete the compulsory nine years of basic schooling and consequently do not attain a basic level of literacy. In some districts more than one-third of the population of school-going age is not attending school (Ghana Living Standards Survey GLSS 2000), either as a result of limited or no access to any type of educational opportunity. But also in comparison to other regions, the Northern region for example, receives very little of the national education budget, approximately 4% of recurrent budget expenditure (GES Internal Budget Book, 2002).

The north also suffers from an acute shortage of teachers in rural areas leading to a situation where many schools are simply not productive. Although the challenges facing teachers who teach in rural areas of Ghana are similar in terms of poor school infrastructure and accommodation, the region presents a particularly difficult challenge for teachers, especially the newly trained teacher. Teachers posted to the rural parts of northern Ghana have to learn how to live within the extended family household compound. Rural community housing requires communal living arrangements that teachers unaccustomed to find especially difficult. Besides, teachers face problems of unsafe drinking water, lack of electricity, poor health facilities, limited transport to neighbouring towns and lack of personal development opportunities (Action Aid Survey Report 2000).

One particular difficulty of providing basic education for children in the north is the nature of community settlements. These tend to be small (sometimes comprising about 10 household units) and widely scattered. Finding appropriate locations for building schools to service reasonable size populations then becomes a real problem. Also many of these areas do not meet government criteria for building schools because of the small population of 6-15 year olds and the low growth rate. The solution has always been to build a school within the most central location and this has led to some primary schools in Ghana being built in the most obscure places with no community identity (Fobih et al. 1999). Even with this strategy, many communities are still not close enough to a formal school which means that pupils have to walk long distances to reach them. According to the Core Welfare indicators report (1998), the Upper West and Upper East regions have the highest percentage of children walking over 30 minutes to school each day. Distance to school is ranked with costs and child labour as major reasons for many children not attending school in the north.

To foster community participation in basic education development it seems necessary for schools, especially for early years of education, to be located within the local community. For this to happen, the organization of such schools will have to be simple enough to minimize

the cost of construction, participation and management. It has been shown that by focusing on basic literacy and numeracy skill development and employing the most literate of local residents trained in the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the classroom, it is possible to reduce considerably the cost of schools in poor rural communities (CARE Ghana Report 2003). But, as the CARE Ghana study discovered, if such schools are to warrant the investment of community time and resources, they must be productive learning centres.

In many respects, Northern Ghana is a good example of an environment where it is difficult to deliver basic education for all children through a one-system approach. The next section explores how the School for Life (SFL) programme in Northern Ghana is taking into account these challenges and striving to introduce a basic education programme through self-help efforts.

The Organizational Setup of the School for Life Education Programme

The School for Life (SFL) programme started in 1995 as a joint co-operation between Northern Ghanaian community-based organisations and Ghanaian and Danish development activists. The Ghanaian development activists are organised under an umbrella organisation called the Ghana Danish Communities Association (GDCA) whereas their Danish counterparts are members of a Danish NGO - Ghana Friendship groups in Denmark or 'GV'. The main funding body is DANIDA which provides funds through the Ghana Friendships group in Denmark. These funds are used mainly for programme administration, in-service teacher training (INSET) training of school facilitators, material development and printing[2], and for helping rural communities build their own schools. The largest expenditure for SFL programmes is in supervision costs followed by textbook production, other operating costs, and ongoing staff training (SFL 2001). SFL has the vision of helping the formal educational system to achieve and sustain increases in functional literacy and in the quality and equitable access to relevant basic education, as a means to address the problems of poverty and underdevelopment in Northern Ghana. The target of the programme is children between the ages of 8 and 14; half of who will be expected to be female if possible. By adopting a skill-based curriculum using the mother tongue, the SFL programme aims to improve the functional literacy and numeracy skills of young children and mainstream them into the formal school system. Textbooks are highly contextualised and their content reflects for example local economic activities (e.g. farming) and issues that local children can easily identify with e.g. hygiene and local environment issues.

Programme design, material development for INSET and classroom teaching are solely the responsibility of indigenous staff. In that sense SFL has strong local management representation operating from its head office in Tamale (capital of Northern region) which

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[2] In each area that SFL agrees to work in, it first translates the instructional text into the local language and trains the school facilitators to read and use them for teaching and learning.

serves as the administrative centre of the programme. SFL's principal officers include the following: programme coordinator, deputy programme coordinator, technical manager, educationists, accountant, and liaison officer. Activities in the districts are managed by a district coordinator with support from a team of supervisors. Their job is to help communities manage their schools and offer on-the-job training to the facilitators who would have received an intensive six-week teacher training course. District coordinators and supervisors are provided with motorbikes and allowance for a weekly ration of fuel. A small number of expatriate staff (usually two) provides administrative and management support to the local SFL team. A board of governors made up of opinion leaders and educationists in the region oversee the work of the organization.

The SFL administrative and operational organization clearly raises the question about how it might be replaced or sustained to support the schools that have been setup, simply because of the cost of maintaining this structure. But this alternative setup may actually be necessary in the short term; to demonstrate how a local education system might consider operating to address the challenges of providing and sustaining an alternative basic school system. But clearly it is not a sustainable setup in the long term. However, because the SFL administrative and organizational setup mirrors that of the local government education system it could work closely with it to transfer some of its human and organizational capacity to the local government education system. An area of similarity in operation between the two institutions is the role played by SFL school supervisors and the district education office circuit supervisors. Many districts in Ghana provide circuit supervisors with bicycles and motorbikes to visit schools and offer professional support to teachers. Sustainability in this context, therefore, has to be thought of in terms of how both institutions; SFL and District Education Offices (DEOs) can work cooperatively to a point where the DEO's structures are adapted and strengthened to handle the education needs of deprived communities. Of course, this will mean additional resources but, as I discuss later, it is possible for this to be absorbed through the budget of a decentralized government authority. In Ghana, a district assembly common fund (DACF) has been set up into which central government allocates funds and from which district assemblies draw their funding to develop education and other services in their constituencies.

It is interesting to note that most SFL officers are former employees of the Ghana Education Service (GES) and in fact many of them originally worked in district education offices in the North. Obviously the offer of better remuneration and conditions of service plays a big part in attracting some of the highly capable GES staff into the programme. As happens with many other NGOs, by poaching education administrators and teachers from government institutions and offering better salaries and a supportive working environment, these personnel are able to work at an optimum level for the programme's success. But, by acting in this way such organizations can be accused of weakening local institutional capacity to deliver quality service. However, if an arrangement exists that allows SFL officers to integrate their knowledge and skills into the local government system, but with a fair degree of autonomy in their new role, then the professional capital acquired would not be lost. This

symbiotic relationship for the assimilation of the SFL programme into the district education system does not appear to be a feature of the SFL initiative.

Community Level Participation, Commitment and Ownership in the SFL Programme

The way in which SFL starts its work is to organize animation meetings with communities that have been identified as potential sites to benefit from the programme. Once communities have expressed interest and willingness to contribute, a compact is agreed upon. An important commitment SFL makes is that its education programme will not interfere with essential family household and economic activities of the community of which children play a crucial role. Child labour in this context is recognized as a social and economic necessity and not despised as an obstacle to education. A timetable for school attendance suitable for the community is negotiated in order for pupils to be available to help their parents on their farms and carry out essential household chores. Usually this means school hours are in the afternoon for up to 3 hours a day for a 5-day week. There can be a maximum of three classes. The programme runs on a 9-month cycle (October to June), which is the dry season thus avoiding interfering with the major farming season when children will be required to offer labour on the farms. Obviously, this arrangement is an attempt to take into consideration the obstacles that can undermine the programme's success and negotiate a deal with parents which does not threaten their economic and social livelihood. Participating communities are also given assurances that SFL will provide all teaching and learning materials required for each school child, and that no formal uniforms are to be worn by pupils, therefore reducing the cost it takes to equip a learner to attend school. The communities have three key responsibilities. They are required to:

* Nominate a volunteer facilitator who is literate in the language of the community and is also resident in that community. This facilitator undergoes training in the use of the instructional materials and on the job training through visits from SFL district supervisors.
* Compensate facilitators (the teachers) in cash, foodstuffs or labour - a good number chose to compensate through labour on the facilitator's farm (CARE Ghana Report 2003).
* Set up a 5-member committee responsible for ensuring that the facilitator is supported sufficiently and the school building is maintained.

Evidence gathered by the CARE study indicated that "community participation in the SFL programme is high on the following: (i) land provisions and site selection, (ii) teachers' selection and firing, (iii) and scheduling of time table ... (and) low on monitoring attendance, and medium on labour and raw materials for setting up the schools" (p. 26).

An important element of the programme is the community graduation ceremonies

which are organized to showcase children's ability to read, write, and solve problems. This quality assurance event appears to be intended to motivate community participation and commitment towards the programme. Evidence from SFL's evaluation report suggests that the programme is making a significant impact in the education landscape of Northern Ghana. SFL has covered about 25% of the communities in the districts it has worked in about a 7-year period, and within this period enrolled about 36,044 pupils and mainstreamed 22,090 (41% girls and 59% boys) into the formal school system, many of who have been able to go as far as the senior secondary school level. Of those enrolled only 3105 students had dropped out but about 11000 SFL graduates have not been able to access the formal school system mainly because the schools c annot be found in or around their area. Some communities have responded to this problem by seeking further assistance from SFL, ACTION AID Ghana[3], and the district assembly to establish formal schools and staff them with teachers. In one particular district, 16 communities had initiated steps with assistance from SFL and the local education authority to establish schools after the programme had phased out in their area. SFL had also assisted over 90 communities to construct their own formal schools after the programme had completed its cycle in the locality (CARE Ghana Report 2003). These actions by poor communities are an indication of the importance they are beginning to attach to education and the efforts they are willing to make to promote it. But, it also shows that poor communities that have embraced self-help efforts still need to have institutions they can turn to for additional assistance to supplement their efforts as and when the need arises.

Sustaining Self-Help Efforts: How Does SFL Measure Up?

SFL scores full marks for initiating a basic education programme that takes into account local characteristics of rural communities to achieve results that seem to motivate self-help efforts at the grass root level. However, an important consideration in sustainable self-help of any large scale education innovation is financial sustainability (Plomp & Thijs 2003). What is clear about the SFL initiative is that a support system or mechanism still needs to be in place to provide any additional funding that may become necessary for the self-help efforts of local people to be sustained or extended. As I have already pointed out, it seems best for this responsibility to be shouldered by local government as they have the mandate to source central government funding and raise additional funds locally. By the very nature of their existence NGOs can only guarantee funding during the life of the project, and cannot be relied upon to continue supporting local initiatives indefinitely. Hence, long-term financial sustainability has to be derived from already existing local structures once the initiative has been firmly embraced and local counterpart commitment has been secured. It is in this

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[3] ACTION AID Ghana runs a programme that recruits senior secondary school leavers with weak tertiary entry grades to receive on-the-job training as teachers. Whilst receiving the training the school leavers are supported with relevant books and equipment to enable them to re-sit their SSS exams.

respect that I believe there is no such thing as pure 'independent self-help efforts'. By this I mean, self-help efforts should by definition represent at a fundamental level, a deep commitment by local people to institutionalise alternative basic education initiative through their own efforts, but within the context of a broader institutional framework that has potential to offer further assistance to complement the efforts of beneficiaries when the need arises. As soon as the funds for supporting the work of SFL stop, as indeed they will at some point, then what support network exists to assist beneficiaries sustain or even extend the benefits of the programme? Although, SFL has had what may be described as fruitful links with some district education authorities for the purpose of mainstreaming its students into the formal school system, it has not entered into any formal working arrangements which would make it possible for them to share experiences and help develop local institutional capacity to sustain what had been started. This means that although it is helping to improve access and participation to basic education for all children, the alternative approach had not become part of the wider system plan of delivering basic education, and by implication, could not benefit from any local funding arrangement for supporting schools. In effect the programme was simply supplementing the formal system, thus doing little to encourage local governments to become more responsible for improving and maintaining the quality of their own system (Plomp & Thijs 2003). The difficulties civil society organisations and NGOs face in forging closer partnership relationships with local institutions are well known - it is often attributed to the layers of bureaucracy that exists in local institutions and suspicion over motives and the psychological distance created as a result of the better conditions of service that personnel of these organizations enjoy. But as Fullan (2000) has noted: "working with systems means conceptualizing strategies with whole systems in mind ... and figuring out the best relationship". The key therefore, is finding productive ways of engaging with local government authority by adopting strategies that boost their institutional capacity and sensitize them into adapting their operations to meet the needs of poor communities in society.

In Ghana, the condition for making such a relationship work is gradually emerging. From 1992, the new constitution of Ghana gave backing to a decentralised policy of local government administration by establishing district assemblies which receive direct funding from central government through a district assembly common fund. The 1992 constitution mandates district assemblies to build and maintain schools in their districts from the common fund and through district internal revenue collection. Some district assemblies have even established education endowment funds to advance education of the district population. Thus, potentially alternative routes to basic education can be sustained in the long term if they are able to dovetail into the formal system and influence policies that shape how money is to be spent to promote basic education for all in the district. This could happen if aid organisations work more assiduously to mainstream their organisational capacity and flexibility into local government structures and institutions. Education decentralization policy offers the hope for interventions such as the SFL programme to achieve this. But first, aid programme providers must see local government institutions, however weak and inefficient they might look, as critical agents in sustaining the self-help efforts of poor rural communities.

The lessons from past efforts seem to suggest that: collaboration must begin early and have a clear strategy for the donor funded programme to exit, when by this time it is hoped that local institutional capacity would have been strengthened to support self-help efforts at community level, and the intervention well integrated into the district strategic plans for development.

Again, the evidence from the SFL programme suggests that for self-help efforts at local community level to be sustained, aid-assisted programmes need to demonstrate sufficient success in order to motivate deep commitment and a spirit of ownership. It would seem that the best way to convince poor people living under deprived and harsh conditions to invest their time and resources into basic education in their community is for the initiative to produce tangible results, such as, evidence of children progressing to the next levels of education. In the case of SFL this has apparently created the incentive for community commitment to education, and even led some of these communities to initiate steps with the help of local government to build schools for SFL graduates to continue with their education.

Concluding Remarks

This paper set out by arguing that a centralized model of basic education cannot adequately serve the needs of certain populations in developing countries that have a peculiar demographic and socio-economic profile. Using Northern Ghana as an example, it painted a picture of the kind of limitations that would make it difficult to reach underserved populations with basic education, and explained the factors that have made it difficult for some national governments to address the needs of poor rural communities. This scenario has led to NGOs and other donor organizations stepping in with various intervention programmes that are more sensitive to local characteristics and achieve a desired result. But I have argued that these measures do not go far enough in addressing the issue of financial sustainability which is crucial for sustaining self-help efforts. More attention during programme planning and design needs to be given to the kind of concrete collaborations that could be forged with local governments in rural areas to improve the chances of sustaining alternative education schemes. As decentralization policy takes root in many emerging democracies in Africa, the possibilities for local government spending on alternative systems of basic education becomes brighter. Although there are challenges in forging partnership relationships with local government authority for reasons already alluded to in the paper, the option is not to by-pass them especially if the self-help efforts of beneficiaries are to be sustained.

Another important lesson from the SFL initiative is that: improving access and participation rates in basic education for poor rural communities must quite early in the programme show evidence of quality and relevance. Quality is crucial for access. Within a reasonable space of time, SFL has managed to improve poor children's literacy and numeracy abilities to the point where many have been successfully mainstreamed into the formal system. They have achieved this by paying attention to the local characteristics of poor rural communities and adjusted the structure, content and delivery of basic education to win the

communities commitment and partnership. Promoting sustainable self-help at the community level therefore requires sensitive approaches that respects and works within the limitations imposed by the demographic and socio-economic conditions of poor societies, and yet yields results that build confidence in poor people about the value of education.

Finally, the long-term sustainability of projects such as the SFL has to be seen beyond what NGOs can realistically offer and do. Although SFL had ended its activities in some communities, it was still working in others and was therefore in the position to respond to special requests from communities in which it had formally concluded its activities. But, of course, eventually such assistance was not going to be available when the whole project finally folds up in the north. At the time of the Ghana CARE study investigating the activities of SFL and other NGOs in northern Ghana, SFL was in negotiation with DANIDA to fund a second phase of the project. Officials were optimistic about securing further funding from DANIDA but were less confident of assistance beyond the second phase. That is why in this paper, I have argued for NGO planning arrangements to take into serious account a framework for collaboration with local government that would eventually shift the burden of financial sustainability to local government, who in my view if seriously challenged, can rise up to this responsibility.

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