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The Evaluation of International Cooperation in Education: Assuring Quality and Effectiveness during Rapid Change

Editorial

Over the last 30 years, the effectiveness of official development assistance (ODA) has been widely and harshly criticized. Despite substantial investments in development assistance, many recipient countries, particularly in Africa, have little to show for the money. There was little sustainable development for the investment. This concern has resulted in considerable rethinking among governments and international organizations about how development assistance funds should be allocated. This rethinking has led to an extensive new emphasis on outcomes-oriented, results-based management of development assistance funding and a greater emphasis on the role and responsibility of recipient governments in planning and implementing development activities. It has also heightened interest in the evaluation of international cooperation in education.

It is hard to argue with the logic of outcomes-oriented development assistance funding. Money should only continue to flow if both donors and recipient countries are clear about what the money is intended to accomplish and there is clear evidence that those intended ends are being achieved. This is accomplished through outcomes-oriented planning and assessed through results-based evaluations of project effectiveness.

This underlying concept has been amplified through the initiation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and the Fast-Track Initiatives (FTI). Both of these funding mechanisms are based on the premise that development funds should be targeted to countries that are making the most efficient use of the money and actually are achieving development results. These countries are defined within the MDG and FTI as those which have enacted good policies and which have minimized corruption.

To maintain support for ODA, those responsible for the allocations of international assistance funds need solid evidence about the effectiveness of alternative approaches, strategies, and activities. Yet ample evidence suggests that evaluation is often an after-thought, often under-funded, and often regarded as a threat to the funding agency rather than as an opportunity to improve practice. Reasons for resistance to rigorous evaluation of ODA vary, but include the tendency of some donors to allow project design be shaped by political considerations that are not fully compatible with technical merit, over-promising during the procurement process in ways that result in unreachable objective, unwillingness to invest in the data collection needed to address important evaluation questions, and sometimes the low technical merit of past evaluation efforts. There is sometimes a concern that program implementers' actions are being driven by a fixation on achieving predefined evaluation criteria rather than by a realistic appraisal of the actual conditions encountered in the field as implementation activities get underway.

Then too, evaluation poses a risk. Donor officials may fear that clear evidence of program weaknesses in ODA may threaten their ability to maintain the political support at home needed to keep the money flowing. If citizens of donor countries were given accurate analyses of the effectiveness of ODA activities or information on how much successful ODA really costs, they might balk at providing further assistance. At a more personal level, there is sometimes a concern among program managers that if evaluation uncovers the need for corrective action, it will be interpreted as a mistake on the part of those responsible for the earlier design and implementation and may be held against them within their own organizational structures.

On the other side of the equation, the eagerness of officials in recipient countries to secure new external funding may swamp their own realistic assessment of what works and what does not. Nonetheless, effectiveness cannot be improved unless there is a commitment to seriously examine the impact of current ODA activities. Results-oriented planning can only work if that planning is based on realistic, accurate, and honest assessments of what is effective, feasible, and affordable.

How can evaluation help both donors and recipients improve the effectiveness of their ODA? This issue of the Journal of International Cooperation in Education is devoted to an examination of issues in the evaluation of international cooperation projects. While many of the evaluation issues addressed in the following papers have broad application across development sectors, the focus in this volume is on their application in education. Articles address three general issues. Two articles (Heyneman; Chapman and Dykstra) examine donor agency issues in allocating and subsequently evaluating development assistance funds for education. Both take a broad view in examining links between donor strategies for awarding assistance and aid effectiveness. Both discuss the role evaluation can play in increasing that effectiveness. One article (Lockheed) focuses more specifically on particular models and techniques for improving evaluation practice. The author provides both conceptual and practical insights for increasing the quality and integrity of evaluation of ODA in education. Finally, three articles (DeStafano et al.; Atchoarena; Minamoto and Nagao) address the implications of evaluation within specific areas of interest – the cost-effectiveness of programs for out-of-school youth, the special needs of the rural poor and the increasing application of interactive forms of evaluation.

Allocating Development Assistance Funds for Education

Stephen Heyneman challenges the impact of foreign aid to education, arguing that the role of the education sector has been overestimated in macro-economic development. A key factor limiting the effectiveness of education aid, he argues, has been a dysfunctional consensus among donor agencies that led to a narrowing of aid focus to basic education for all, at the expense of other important areas of the education sector. Universal access to primary education essentially swamped other sector priorities. The narrowing of focus has resulted in a loss of balance within international assistance to education and reduced the flow of education aid to little more than humanitarian assistance. Heyneman argues that this one-dimensional view of the purpose of education has diminished respect for the sector and made it politically difficult for donors to take an interest in other parts of the education sector.

In calling for greater evaluation of international assistance to education, he discusses the differing roles and agendas of non-governmental, bilateral, and multilateral organizations in the provision of international assistance to education. In particular, he points out that bilateral assistance is allocated in support of foreign policy goals of the donor country, of which altruism is only one of several priorities. Given the differences, he argues that the evaluation of aid effectiveness needs to treat these different types of organizations in light of their different mandates. At the same time, across all these organizational types, Heyneman argues the need for independent evaluation conducted by individuals and organizations other than those who benefit from a project.

In awarding aid to education, donor organizations have choices about the mechanisms through which development funds can be converted into on-the-ground development activities, choices that can shape the eventual impact and effectiveness of the assistance. The mechanisms differ in the goals they most directly promote, the benefits most likely to be reaped and, consequently, which groups are most likely to gain. **Chapman and Dykstra** examine the mechanisms used by one of the larger bilateral donor organizations, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Chapman and Dykstra trace the evolution of of USAID’s use of problem-, project-, and program-focused assistance strategies. Within USAID’s current emphasis on program funding, they examine the pros and cons associated with channeling funds through recipient governments, non-governmental organizations, and private contractors and the implications of those choices on project design and evaluation. Additionally they discuss the pressure on recipient governments posed by project design and evaluation requirements of international donor organizations.

They contend that judgments about aid effectiveness are complex in large part because development assistance funds are often intended to simultaneously promote multiple goals and address the needs of multiple audiences. Participants may differ in the criteria they use to judge a project’s success, the indicators they find credible for measuring progress on those criteria, and the standards they use to determine how much progress on those criteria represents success. The various partners in the implementation process may not move at similar rates or share enthusiasm for the same outcomes that donor agencies want to emphasize in evaluating aid effectiveness. This poses conceptual and technical dilemmas for the meaningful evaluation of development assistance activities. A central challenge, then, is to develop consensus on what constitutes successful development assistance.

Improving Evaluation Models and Techniques

Marlaine Lockheed describes efforts within the World Bank to introduce greater scientific rigor into self-evaluation of educational programs offered by the Bank for Bank staff and government, business, and community leaders in developing countries. The implications of these technical improvements are substantial, given the size and scope of the Bank's educational program. The World Bank delivers about 800 learning and capacity building activities to over 56,000 people in 100 counties annually and provides over 2,000 learning activities to about 10,000 Bank staff each year. She discusses the increased use of mixed methods, valid and reliable measures of learning, the use of comparison groups, and scientific sampling. She provides a series of examples of how sampling was employed in ways that reduced the burden on respondents but still provided evaluators with a valid indication of learning. She also describes the use of increasingly sophisticated statistical procedures for testing the meaningfulness of the change in levels of participant knowledge, chronicling the move from an emphasis on descriptive statistics, through the use of bivariate tests, to the greater reliance on multivariate analyses of learning gains. Lockheed describes how that added rigor contributed to program improvement.

Evaluation of ODA in Specific Contexts

Joseph DeStefano, Ash Hartwell, Audrey Moore and Jane Benbow provide a powerful example of how an evaluation of international development projects, when done well, can offer important new insight into effective strategies. These authors present a multi-county cost analysis of three programs designed for out-of-school youth. How to provide a 'second chance' for children who either never entered or dropped out prior to completion of primary school is a perplexing problem for many countries. While non-formal programs to reach these students operate in many countries, there is often a concern that these programs may be of inferior quality and more expensive than regular public schooling. DeStafano and colleagues provide a systematic assessment of the cost effectiveness of 'complementary programs' in Ghana, Honduras, and Mali, comparing cost, learning outcomes, and completion rates between students in these programs and those in public schools.

The results may surprise many education policy makers. All three complementary programs were more effective at providing access, learning, and completion than comparable levels of the public systems in each country. While the unit cost of instruction in all three programs is higher than the unit cost of corresponding public schools, the better completion rates and learning outcomes indicate that the complementary programs are a more cost-effective investment. DeStafano and colleagues use these findings to highlight the role that private, non-governmental organizations can play in promoting access and improving quality of schooling in developing countries.

Place constitutes an important dimension in the consideration of public policy. Though 51 percent of the world's population live in rural areas and 70 percent of the world's poor are located in rural areas, **David Atchoarena** observes that the international development community exhibits an urban bias. He builds a case for greater attention to the special needs of rural areas in analyzing and evaluating education support efforts in developing countries. In particular, he contends that the movement to sector wide program assistance (SWAP) funding has hurt the rural poor and that current evaluation tools often fail to address the special characteristics of education in rural settings.

He presents the 'livelihood approach' as a way of understanding issues faced by those in rural areas. This approach builds on people's assets and strength rather than focus on what people do not have. It emphasizes the economic and social integration of those in rural areas within the larger society. Education-only responses to rural development, he argues, are likely to fail. Rather, the success of education aid in rural areas will require the use of multi-sectoral approaches and will need to emphasize high levels of community involvement in the design and implementation of education activities. To illustrate his argument, he describes the global Education for Rural People (ERP) Flagship partnership aimed at promoting Education for All (EFA) for rural populations. The emphasis within ERP is to promote collaboration among sectors that have often worked apart, e.g. agriculture, rural development, and education. It emphasizes development of capacity building as a key mechanism to assist donor communities and governments to better target and evaluate their education interventions in rural areas.

While there is a clear trend toward outcomes-oriented development assistance, with an accompanying emphasis on greater accountability for project delivery, the implementation process of aid projects is also receiving a new focus in recent evaluations. **Yuriko Minamoto and Masafumi Nagao** review process considerations in educational assistance evaluation, taking, as examples, several projects carried out since the late 1990s by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The Japanese ODA policy has traditionally emphasized the importance of self help and local capacity building by developing countries to make the impact of aid sustainable. This thinking is finding new support in the growing ownership discourse for ODA. Although these authors do not necessarily find a new process focus in the conventional evaluation of JICA's education sector cooperation, they detect an increased interest in the role of monitoring and evaluation for improving project management so that technical and institutional conditions are created along the project path for ensuring greater sustainability.

They observe an increasing application of participatory or interactive forms of evaluation in the process of project development and implementation. This development clearly reflects the increasingly symmetric relationship between aid donors and recipients. To illustrate how process focus may be actually woven into the project design and implementation, they describe a collaborative evaluation practice as reinforced by the Japanese tradition of group work within a South African mathematics and science education project. The case may suggest a promising direction for process focus in ODA evaluation. It also raises a new and challenging issue of how to strengthen the local evaluation capacity in developing countries so that they can internalize the evaluation process as well.

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