International Journal of Educational Development xxx (2015) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Educational Development

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedudev

The effectiveness of foreign aid to education
What can be learned?

Abby Riddell [a], Miguel Niño-Zarazúa [b,*]

[a] Mokoro Ltd., Oxford, UK
[b] United Nations University, World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), Helsinki, Finland

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Education policy
Foreign aid
Developing countries
Aid effectiveness

ABSTRACT

This article reviews what has been learned over many decades of foreign aid to education and discusses what works and what does not work. It shows the positive contribution that aid has made to education in aid-recipient countries, the most tangible outcome of which is the contribution that aid makes to expanding enrolments especially of basic education. But the article also indicates that there is a considerable gap between what aid does and what it could potentially achieve, especially in relation to its contribution to improvements in educational quality. It shows the distortions caused by focusing on enrolments and insufficiently on quality. Sustainable education outcomes will not be achieved merely by reproducing yet more successful, but individual projects. Perversely, development agencies which focus only on demonstrable short-term impact may well be contributing, unwittingly, to an undermining of long-term impact on the education systems and their deepening development, to whose progress they are trying to contribute.

1. Introduction

The simplicity of the question, 'What do we know about what works in foreign aid to education?' unfortunately, is not matched by the simplicity of a list of effective interventions or the simplicity in the way aid to education is provided. In recent years there have also been many new and different approaches in the provision of aid to education. If that doesn't make an assessment of the effectiveness of aid to education difficult enough, the challenges are compounded by the fact not only that education serves many purposes, but educational outcomes are influenced more by what goes on outside schools than within them—widening further the complexities involved in assessing the effectiveness of foreign aid to education. It is at least as challenging as assessing attempts to reform and improve our own national education systems, without crossing international boundaries. Nonetheless, decades of work and accrued knowledge and experience have yielded lessons of what works best, even if such lessons reflect detailed approaches involving capacity development, mentoring, new accountabilities as well as specific 'inputs'.

The basics of support to education comprise what could be termed 'first order' educational requirements such as classrooms, teachers and instructional materials. However, educational outcomes are profoundly influenced by a range of critical and less easily measurable factors such as the nature of the curriculum, the effectiveness of teacher training, the appropriateness of learning materials, school location, school and teacher amenities, the mentoring, supervision and leadership of heads and teachers, the status and respect afforded them by the local community and its involvement in the school. Foreign aid to education can both focus on and contribute greatly to some of these building blocks to improved learning, but drawing a direct causal connection between the foreign aid provided and learning achievements involves far more than merely counting the number of pupils enrolled in primary school and assessing progress towards universal enrolment, one of the Millennium Development Goals. But even here critical problems often arise. When countries near the goal of universal primary education, many face huge challenges to include the final five or so per cent, as these are the 'hardest-to-reach' often including those with a range of disabilities and those from marginalized groups. Achieving anything near to universal access also remains a huge challenge in many fragile states, no less ensuring that the learning provided within the classroom is of a standard and quality to enable those passing through the schools to lead fulfilling and productive lives.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: abby.riddell@gmail.com (A. Riddell), miguel@wider.unu.edu (M. Niño-Zarazúa).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2015.11.013

Against this complex backdrop, most aid agencies take the 'easy' route in providing an account to the public at home of the results of their interventions in the education field—by focussing mostly on reporting on the 'numbers assisted' rather than educating the public, on whose votes they rely, and deepening public awareness of the complicated nature of development effectiveness (and only one of its constituents, aid effectiveness). In some cases, they go even further, claiming in their 'simple sound-bites' achievements for which the evidence is wanting. For instance, the largest multi-donor funded education programme, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE, formerly known as the Fast-Track Initiative or FTI) claims that 'countries receiving support from the GPE perform better in all basic education indicators than countries receiving no Partnership support' implying that 'their' foreign aid has 'worked'[1]. In contrast, having reviewed the best available evidence, the Preliminary Report of the Mid-Term Evaluation of the Education for All (EFA) Fast Track Initiative (Cambridge Education et al., 2009), was only able to conclude that there is 'no robust evidence that FTI-endorsed countries have systematically outperformed un-endorsed ones'[2].

The purpose of this article is to review what has been learned over many decades of foreign aid to education. It discusses what works and what doesn't and in this discussion will draw attention to the fact that even a simple assessment requires more than providing a uniform check-list of 'inputs'. It goes on to provide some guidance as to how aid effectiveness could be improved to reach more sustainable, education outcomes. This article does not, however, seek to provide prescriptive answers to specific problems, but instead to define a broad set of unresolved issues in the aid architecture for education. Thus, the reader should approach this article as a problem-posing piece, in which questions are raised (not answered), for future research in the field.

The article is organised as follows: Section 2 focuses on what we know about aid's impact on education, going through some of the constituent factors and some of the major studies of aid to education. Section 3 examines each of the more important ways aid has been provided—the different 'aid modalities' project aid, sector-wide approaches (SWAps) including programme-based approaches (PBAs) and budget support. Some of the ways these interventions have changed and been improved over time are also discussed. Section 4 focuses on some of the most important 'wider issues' that are essential to understanding the overall contribution that aid can make to education and what factors continue to impede success. This includes what we know about bringing to scale different aid-supported programmes, and the lessons learned and challenges still facing aid donors in the critical areas of budgetary support, institutional strengthening, the political dimensions of aid-giving, the 'transferability' of aid-supported educational programmes, capacity development via technical co-operation, knowledge transfer, financial support and South–South dialogue. Finally, Section 5 draws together the threads of earlier sections to make some concluding remarks on the effectiveness of aid to education and what has been learned.

2. What works in foreign aid to education?

Educationists have continually pointed out that it is far easier to show the impact of aid-supported health interventions than education ones: improvements in mortality rates are more visible in the short term than increased learning. However, when attempting to assess the contribution of aid to service-delivery, aid to the health sector faces quite similar challenges as does aid to education. This is because attribution is typically multifaceted: providing textbooks and speeding up textbook distribution, like the provision of anti-malarial bednets, will no doubt contribute to overall impact, but determining and especially trying to quantify its specific contribution to broader outcomes is far from easy when set alongside many other contributory factors, only some of which are aid-related. And to identify *sustainable improvements* is even more difficult as it requires attention to the social, political and economic contexts of the reform as well as the inter-linkages with inputs from other sectors.

2.1. Aid to education and aid impact studies

From 1995 to 2010 total aid to education increased in real terms by 360 per cent, from US$2.9bn (in constant 2010 US$) to US$13.3bn in 2010 (see Table 1). Over this same period, total aid to basic education increased by 630 per cent, to secondary education, by 294 per cent and to post-secondary education, by 244,268 per cent[3]. Whereas the breakdown by sub-sector of aid to education in 1995 comprised 19 per cent to basic, 12 per cent to secondary education and less than 1 per cent to post-secondary education, in 2010, this breakdown was 30 per cent for basic, 10 per cent for secondary education, and with post-secondary education attracting 40 per cent of total aid to education.

Whilst recent studies suggest that aid has contributed to positive educational achievements over the past decades (see Birchler and Michaelowa, 2016; in this Issue), it remains difficult to quantify the impact of aid on education outcomes for a number of reasons. Part of the problem has been the focus of impact on school enrolment and attainment rather than on measurements of education quality. To some extent, this has been rectified by the creation of data on educational achievement indicators such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) as well as from regional learning achievement studies such as the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) and the Programme on the Analysis of Education Systems of the Conference of Ministers of Education of Francophone Africa (PASEC)[4]. However, the focus of many development agencies has still been on the contribution of aid toward the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, and therefore on increased enrolments, attainment and gender parity[5].

Aid has been channelled into a variety of interventions such as school feeding programmes, classroom construction, teacher education, girls' scholarships, programmes to reduce student drop-out, curriculum development, targeting different educational levels and utilizing different aid modalities. Project impact evaluations by development agencies have tended to produce more positive results than the studies of aid impact utilizing panel data from international aid and education statistics. When focused

[1] http://www.globalpartnership.org/results/comparative-performance-data-gpe-vs-non-gpe-countries/ (accessed 3 January 2012). Five indicators were used: (1) total enrolment; (2) primary school completion rate; (3) gender parity in primary completion; (4) percentage of repeaters; and (5) percentage of total government expenditure devoted to education.

[2] The Report continues: 'These findings are not surprising, given the short data series available, the likelihood of selection biases, the complexity of underlying processes and the heterogeneity of countries within each group'.

[3] These total aid to education figures can be compared with those for total aid to the health sector: for the same period, in real terms, aid to the health sector increased from US$2.4bn to US$9.2bn, an increase of 284 per cent, and for aid to basic health, the increase was 397 per cent, from US$1.4bn to US$7.1bn (OECD StatExtracts, 2012).

[4] Programme d'analyse des systèmes éducatifs de la CONFEMEN, where CONFEMEN stands for Conférence des ministres de l'éducation des pays ayant le français en partage.

[5] See for example the UNESCO (2011) Education for All Global Monitoring Report that highlights the achievements in terms of school enrolment, and reduced gender gaps.

Please cite this article in press as: Riddell, A., Niño-Zarazúa, M., The effectiveness of foreign aid to education. Int. J. Educ. Dev. (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2015.11.013