

**'Making Education Services Work  
for Poor People'**

by

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## ***Making education services work for poor people***

Implicit in the title is the assumption that services currently do not work for poor people. This paper starts by exploring this assumption and some of the reasons why education services do not work for poor people, why there is poor demand for education. Some of the areas where it is usual for governments to be involved, particularly around the setting of standards for education provision, are then outlined. It is these areas where governments have a continuing legitimacy, setting the legal requirements, the overall policy targets, and the standards that are expected of people and institutions, of materials and examination. However, as is then discussed, governments are not necessarily the most appropriate provider of all services related to education. Demand-side constraints, or demand-side needs, sometimes dictate or lead towards the requirement for alternative provisions, outside of the formal and mainstream education system. A substantial section of the paper looks at whole school development and some of the innovative approaches to school development planning, or school improvement planning. Essentially, these are within-government approaches, which address the need to improve the quality of education services with the involvement of and managed by school-community teams. It is concluded that while there are areas where private provision can be complementary and supportive of government education systems, for poor people the education of choice is most likely to be an improved quality schooling provided by the government and accessible to all.

### **Demand for education – why services do not work for poor people.**

What is obvious from working in poorer communities, and from research undertaken in predominantly lower socio-economic areas, is that there are both factors related to service provision and to household socio-economy, dynamics and relationships which affect demand for education<sup>1</sup>.

On the provider's side, the quality of education (a subjective perception) is often below expectations – but in areas which at times may not be acknowledged by adult providers or family members. To give two examples: firstly, violence in schools is a surprisingly common deterrent. Adult bullying of children in school (often excused as acceptable corporal punishment), and sexual violence (by teachers or older pupils) are reported as common occurrences. The number of girls in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) who are forced to leave school early because of unwanted pregnancy presents a frightening testimony to the latter. Secondly, the inappropriate nature of schooling which provides an education not suited to the expectations or requirements of the local communities is of significance as a disincentive in rural communities and ethnic minority communities in particular. Teachers are most likely to come from urban backgrounds and from the dominant ethnic groups and are therefore least likely to share the values of and be able to empathise with the needs of pupils in their schools.

The claim (often made by policy makers) that the poorest 'are not aware of the need for education' is not substantiated by research or empirical observation. Poor households often make considerable sacrifices to enable at least one of their children (usually the eldest male child) to complete a primary cycle. Other children are not kept out of school because the parents do not value education, but for a variety of reasons – financial and non-monetary '*costs*', and the poor

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<sup>1</sup> This paper will not explore the factors affecting demand for education in depth. The following points are illustrative of some of the issues which are relevant to the discussion on making services work for poor people.

quality (again – a highly subjective interpretation) of the education available. However, the gender differences in the value of education is persistently negative for girls – although in some communities this may be reversed with the value of education for boys being less than girls. The latter is the case where the disadvantage of lost earning opportunities to keep boys in school outweighs the advantages of keeping them in school. There may be seasonal fluctuations in opportunities, but the long periods out of school prevent their return to an interrupted curriculum. ‘Failure’ is also an influence on continuing in school: the need to repeat years is a disincentive to children, particularly where the child’s academic failure is as much caused by a failure of the system to provide adequate schooling as to the child’s inability to learn and succeed in tests. The assumption of future failure (where the child considers they will not be able to pass a test at the end of the year, or where the teacher informs them that they will not be entered for examinations) also causes early drop-out. This may be influenced by gender, where it is assumed by parents, teachers or themselves that girls (generally) will not succeed. Families make rational choices, based on a complex web of demand and supply side factors, and not choices of ignorance.

The dynamic nature of poverty means that there are considerable populations, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and the poorest Asian communities who move in and out of poverty. This may be short-term (seasonal fluctuations often related to agricultural cycles) or longer term (typically as a consequence of severe drought, flood or famine). The consequences of the resultant inconsistent attendance of children in school (their interrupted schooling) cannot be addressed through a rigidly structured and implemented curriculum and education system which does not have built-in mechanisms to respond to fluctuations in fortune. One has only to think of the monsoon flooded villages of Nepal and Bangladesh, or the famine afflicted communities in SSA to understand why children find it impossible at times to attend school. Contributing to poverty dynamics is the non-congruity between the inflexible timing of the school year and demands for labour of the agricultural or other productive cycles, such as fishing. In many instances the school years has an historical genesis: they are based on the former colonial power’s education system, and hence reflect the European agricultural cycle, not the needs of the tropics and sub-tropics.

Making education services work for poor people has therefore to take into account the diversity of reasons why those services do not currently work. As others have noted, additional funding may be necessary but it is not sufficient to ensure services are working for what is often the majority of the population in the poorest countries. It is not simply a question of ‘more’, if that ‘more’ has the same weaknesses: of distribution of funds and resources, of attitudes and perceptions, of supervision and of maintenance of education standards. Although there are undoubtedly many schools which are of dangerously poor fabric, which are too small to accommodate the number of pupils, and do not have the basic necessities for teaching, there are many more which are simply badly managed, with demotivated (or even corrupt) staff, and serving the needs of the provider not the ‘client’, the children.

‘Voting with their feet’ is an option i.e. seeking alternative, better quality, education. However, this option is not an option for all children: if there is no alternative readily available, if they cannot afford the costs, or, often in the case of girls, if parents or they themselves chose not to pay the costs.

Why is education desirable, why do we emphasise the rights of the child to education? There are multiple answers to this, some instrumentalist, some more philosophical or moralistic. How quality is defined is closely linked to why education is desirable – people judge education using criteria related to what they want from education. Table one gives some ideas on the links

between the purpose that people see education having and how they judge effectiveness – what quality indicators they use. The different desires of policy makers, of parents, of children, of politicians, lead to at times conflicting quality measures. The following two sets of illustrations introduce some perceptions of quality of different groups. These identify issues that contribute to whether the educational needs of poor people are met either in the formal government provided education system or through non-state provision.

*The purpose of education* (1): education is a means to an end not an end in itself. The desire for primary education has been demonstrated to be a desire for a formal qualification, usually not achieved until end of grade 8 at the earliest, sometimes grade 10. This is seen, not always realistically, as a passport to urban-based higher paid employment, as a means to move out of a state of poverty. Education for education's sake is an idealism of the philosophers, of the intellectuals, and not a practical approach in an environment where regulated, standardised achievements are the measure of success: of teachers, of institutions and of the individuals. The last decade in the UK demonstrates this emphasis well, with the introduction of testing of children at regular intervals throughout their educational careers, some would say to the detriment of allowing child development through creative educational approaches. The testing process leads to the 'tail wagging the dog': the schooling of children to pass tests of a preset content, rather than engaging in all-round educational development. This focus on testing or examinations is common as a measure of 'quality': parents will often claim that their desire to send their children to particular schools is because more students pass end of school examinations. In situations where government providers cannot meet these parental desires where they can afford to do so, and where it is a practical possibility, parents do send their children to private schools.

Nepal is a good example to illustrate this last point. A largely urban phenomenon is the rise in private schools. However, these are not regulated, and there is evidence to suggest that those functioning as profit-making institutions exploit their teaching force, do not provide good quality schooling and achieve little more than their government counterparts in the same locations. That is to say, state schools in urban areas compare relatively favourably to private schools. They are usually better resource-endowed, are better managed and offer a better quality education than government schools in remoter and/or inaccessible locations. In Nepal recent legislation is attempting to address this through the registration of private schools. They are trying to rationalise private school provision categorising them as 'institutionalised', 'education trust', or 'company' schools. However, this is complicated as those that operate in government owned or public buildings, those with buildings built on government or public land and those whose buildings are built on land donated by an individual donor or institution cannot be converted into company schools.<sup>2</sup> What is clearly observable is that private schools in general are only available in urban areas, therefore restricting access of children particularly in the hill and mountain areas of Nepal. The majority of the population resides in the Terai (the flat plain bordering North Indian) where access to private schools is more likely; the lack of access to private schools for children in the other hill/mountain areas fuels a depopulation trend, the internal migration to the Terai.

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<sup>2</sup> This illustrates the point that it is sometimes difficult to clearly determine whether a school is public or private. 'No.1 schools' in China and Mongolia also demonstrate this same problem: they are 'government' schools that receive additional funds and resources and are permitted to charge fees. They have more of the private school characteristics but are within the government system. They are highly sought after and places in them are highly prized.

The other observable feature is the gender bias in private enrolments. Nepal has one of the widest gender gaps in school enrolment (with wide variations between different locations), but it is possible to enter a large government school in an urban centre to find a greater number of girls attending. Why? Because the boys have been sent to the more desirable private school down the road. Where households have limited resources, where they are unable to send all children to private institutions, sons are given the opportunity of an education provided through private schools, while daughters either do not attend school or attend the government school.

Note also that the language of instruction is another pull factor. Private schools usually provide an English medium education. In urban areas and in formal employment being fluent in the use of English is desirable. Social structures are such that this is predominantly a desire for male schooling. Note, though, that in the tourist areas of the high mountains, English language is necessary for all children if households are to gain socio-economic advantages from this trade. The desire for education is, in these cases, fuelled by an existing economic opportunity. This phenomenon of desire for English medium schooling is seen in many countries, and is often contrary to the education specialist's and government policy maker's discussion on the importance of valuing local languages and not imposing an external (the neo-Colonialist) language. The difference in political imperatives and household socio-economic imperatives clearly contribute to the contradictory nature of the definition of education quality.

The household desire for English medium education, or indeed for the predominant National language in early learning, is, though, not universally the case as illustrated in the following example.

*The purpose of education (2):* to continue with the Nepal example, there are so-called disadvantaged ethnic groups whose children enjoy the lowest enrolment rates to Government schools, and even within this low enrolment the gender gap is considerable. However, these children do get an education: they do not get a government schooling. They are taught by village elders, in a home environment. This offers several advantages: local language, cultural specificity, acceptance of the student by the teacher, and a 'curriculum' which is relevant to the lives of the children in their village. The government school provides none of these. These village-level centres are the services that work for these poorest of communities. The purpose of their education is to fit them for life in their own communities. It contributes to social reproduction and the perpetuation of valued cultural practices. Unfortunately, they also contribute to the perpetuation of marginalisation, the continued lack of access to information and exclusion from mainstream society. This exclusion may also deny them voting rights, limit their democratic entitlements, and hence what small influence they may have nationally or locally. They are not services, therefore, which provide children with an education which will fit them for life in the wider environment of Nepal, will not make them acceptable to employers, or give them the means to pull themselves out of their socio-economic poverty.

### **Non-state provision**

Some groups, then, are alienated from the mainstream provision. Where do they turn for schooling? Often their choice is determined by costs, both direct and indirect, and is a choice between whatever is locally available or involvement in survival activities – and no schooling. Some of the best known examples of alternatives to government services for first-learning education for children are found in Bangladesh. The BRAC schools have become the by-word for successful NGO education. They provide centres of education for children in areas where

there is demand and where there is a suitable woman who can be trained as a teacher. They employ local women who have at least 9 years of education and give them rapid training to teach children in village centres. These are single class centres often in the teacher's home and the teacher takes a single cohort from entry through three years of education. They focus on child-centred education, using non-didactic teaching methods. Books and materials are supplied by the centres. Class hours are flexible. Classes meet for two and half-hours each day. A convenient timing, for each school, is decided jointly by the teacher and the parents to suit seasonal work and other needs. Classes are held six days a week, 268 days a year. They have many of the characteristics of the education provided by the village elder described above in the Nepal 'disadvantaged' ethnic group villages. These are the types of services that work for the poor. Or do they?

There are perhaps three main points to make. The first is that these centres largely provide education for girls; where do the poorest boys go? In many parts of Bangladesh the opportunity costs of sending boys to government school outweigh the benefits; they, therefore, are effectively excluded from school.

Secondly, transferability is a significant problem. The Government does not accept the quality of the education being provided in these centres as equivalent to that of the government school. If children wish to continue their education they cannot enter at the grade relevant to their age. There are no mechanisms to enable the transfer of a student from the BRAC centre to a government primary school. In Punjab where the BRAC system was introduced (as Bunyad centres) to address access problems of girls in rural areas a similar constraint existed. The mutual dis-respect of government and non-government providers of schooling does a considerable disservice to the poorest children.

The third point in Bangladesh related to BRAC schools is the remarkable complexity of the primary education system (with 11 different types of school), and the relative, apparent success of the government in increasing enrolment rates to primary education. However, whether this apparent success is genuine is doubtful. Enrolment in school and continual attendance enables 40% for the poorest children to receive stipends or food for education. Although this is largely anecdotal there are many places where it is reported that children enrol at both NGO and government schools to benefit from the money, goods and materials being provided. Hence, this enrolment does not necessarily translate into better education. Are the NGO schools pulling children out of government school without providing them an equivalent education suiting them for later employment or enhanced life chances?

This example of Bangladesh NGO schools provides some useful indicators with which to judge the value of educational benefits accruing to students. Are NGOs providing a genuine gap filling service, or are they unnecessarily or inappropriately pulling children from formal schools? Are they providing a standard of education which can be measured alongside government standard measures? Are there mechanisms in place which allow children to transfer to the formal system for higher primary grades, or post-primary education? Is there mutual respect between the NGO and government providers of education? What are the gender dynamics at play which determine the need for or the use of NGO schools, and do these need to be addressed in order to open up wider opportunities for girls and for boys? What are the socio-economic dynamics at play and do these lead the poor to an inferior 'brand' of education which (all other things being equal) would be unacceptable to higher socio-economic groups?

Similar debates surround the provision of non-formal education to meet the needs of particular groups of children otherwise excluded, such as street children, the disabled, and those who have failed to reach required standards in the formal system, or where the state has failed to provide a relevant/acceptable schooling. Vietnam perhaps presents an illustrative example. The formal primary curriculum delivered through government schools is known as the '160 hour curriculum'; this was shown to be failing children from ethnic minorities living in hill-side villages, who found the curriculum too academic and far removed from their needs. An alternative '120 hour curriculum' was developed to meet the needs of these children. UNICEF then supported the introduction of a non-formal '100 hour curriculum' for street children and other out-of-school children – the 'failures' of the formal system. This last non-formal curriculum does not provide sufficient learning opportunities for students to compete equally with those emerging from the formal system. A further criticism is that it provides a gap-filler which diverts attention away from the failings of the formal system. Rather than looking at why the formal system is failing the out-of-school children and improving the quality of the mainstream system so that all eligible children can participate, it encourages complacency – especially when the Government can claim Universal Basic Education targets are being met.

### **Within government quality improvements: how to make government services work for poor people.**

To reiterate the point made earlier with a different emphasis, quality of education needs to be the focus of attention, rather than quantity. Although not always and everywhere, it is generally the case that physical access to school has been provided within acceptable distances and time. Some of the exceptions are in those countries or areas with low population density, and those communities who do not live in fixed space - transhumanists. Both of these types of communities require non-conventional service provision, and these are documented elsewhere. What is equally true, is that there are populations in a large number of countries where enrolment is one problem solved<sup>3</sup>, but the quality of schooling is still highly problematic. Effective schools require more than inputs, (which include the students): appropriate, acceptable and standardised processes (what goes on in the school) are essential if the outcomes (the achievements from schooling) are judged to be acceptable.

Internationally experiences show that identifying the reasons for low enrolment and then raising enrolment levels are relatively easy options; however, these are often short-term gains which are not sustained if the quality of education being delivered is less than desirable. An example

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<sup>3</sup> It should be pointed out, however, that the claim of 'enrolment solved' is not necessarily the reality, neither should it be seen as an end point of ambition. Bangladesh, for example, appears self-satisfied over its achievements in increasing primary enrolment rates. But closer observation shows that compulsory obligation on parents to enrol children in class one pushes up the enrolment numbers, but children do not remain in class, do not progress smoothly through grades, and do not successfully complete five years of primary schooling in any significant numbers. Early figures emerging from an improved EMIS process graphically demonstrate this failure to engage children through five years of schooling, and to provide them an education which permits them to exit primary school able to read and write, and very limited numbers (especially of girls) who can progress to junior secondary grades. The goal of high GER is only a starting point, but is unfortunately in some cases used as the end achievement. In Bangladesh, quality has now been recognised in some quarters as a necessary focus, and efforts are now placed on quality improvements. However, it is still the case that the significant success in improving GERs for boys and girls is used to justify a lack of concern for gender constraints to schooling i.e. the processes that take place which affect either boys' or girls' chances of succeeding.

illustrates. Uganda in the mid-1990s had an immediate impact on enrolment levels by abolishing school fees, while at the same time increasing the number of school buildings and classrooms. The commensurate regulations, which specified the household entitlement of four children having free schooling, two of whom had to be girls, ensured gender equity in enrolment. This positive experience appears to be eroding, though, with enrolment levels declining (see Uganda PRSP, 2000). In a recent research study (Reaching the poor: the “costs” of sending children to school, 2002, in process) parents and children from poor households in rural Uganda identified a set of process factors which contributed to their perception of the poor quality of local schooling. The majority of these factors linked to the teacher: their motivation, their teaching ability, and the way they disciplined children in their care. The latter was a particular problem for children – they stayed away from school for fear of being beaten by the teacher. They also judged the quality of schooling by outcome – whether children ‘performed well’. Although the Ugandan government is addressing ‘quality’ issues, the lack of synchronisation of improvements to quantity and quality appears to be having an effect on sustainability of high levels of attendance and enrolment.

Effective academic supervision systems can certainly be part of a comprehensive approach to improving the quality of education processes. Enabling, and implementing, a deconcentrated management structure with local level autonomy (see below – whole school development) and within a universal set of minimum standards for all education actors is a key role of the Government. These standards apply to all providers, although regulation of non-government providers often proves problematic in developing countries with limited personnel resources to impose rules.

### **Setting standards**

Certain standards are required of and/or within education systems. It is generally the case (always?) that Governments set these minimum standards which are adhered to by all providers. The most obvious examples are examination systems. Not only are national examinations systems established with common examinations being sat by students irrespective of the service provider, these are often of internationally agreed standards. Although the government may agree and set the standard, and may also verify the meeting of those standards, who writes the question papers and who marks them may or may not come within the government remit.

This also means that the curriculum needs to at least contain the same subject matter, if the same examination papers are to be sat.<sup>4</sup> The concept of a core curriculum has widespread acceptance, although the syllabus that delivers that curriculum does not necessarily have to have the same uniformity. Indeed, observations of classes where the teacher has to pursue the identical curriculum in the identical syllabus and using identical texts is a dispiriting exercise! What goes around the core curriculum also varies, and greater access to additional resources to pursue non-core subjects influences what schools can and do offer. Some obvious examples are computer sciences<sup>5</sup>, music, art, and sports. Where parents are required to contribute towards these

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<sup>4</sup> Which comes first – the curriculum or the examination paper? This is another example where there is a danger of ‘the tail wagging the dog’. That is to say, it is decided what information the child has to know, what they are to be tested on, and the curriculum follows, rather than a rational and educationally sound curriculum being developed which the examination system then reflects.

<sup>5</sup> Computer science is still only accessible to those in areas with continuous and reliable electricity supplies, to those with the computers and their additional hard-ware and soft-ware requirements, and to those whose teachers can teach this subject, are themselves computer literate. Making these services work for the poor

additional subjects (providing costly musical instruments for example) inequity emerges between those parents who can and cannot afford these additions.

One area where private involvement in education has been an increasing and encouraged trend is in the production of text books. Although the curriculum may be determined centrally, the texts to teach that curriculum do not need to be the same in all schools (or classes), and they do not have to be 'one'. Government involvement in monitoring standards of text books, ensuring that they meet certain criteria, again set by government boards which may include external advisers and specialists, and in the best examples teachers and parents, is normal and desirable. But opening up book production to competition between private publishers seems to encourage better quality productions and longer lasting books. Free provision of good quality text books is necessary if primary education is truly to be free and available to the poorest. Revolving text-book schemes have been successfully employed in some places to ensure that book costs do not escalate for parents or for the state. Elsewhere using books for more than one year is encouraged – a possibility where the quality is improved sufficiently that books do not fall to pieces immediately they are used. There are examples of multiple book options and private publishing houses competing to produce quality, affordable school books. These are indeed improving services for the benefit of poor people.

The qualifications required of teachers to teach at different grades and the teacher education standards are also set by governments, standards usually applied to all providers of formal schooling. The teacher education may or may not be supplied through government institutions (private provision is possibly more significant at tertiary than earlier levels of education), but the expectation of a regulated, standard qualifications irrespective of who delivers the courses exists, an expectation of parents and students as much as of managers and officers in and beyond the education system. 'Untrained teachers' is often a negative accusation of schools deemed to be of a poor standard by parents (Reaching the poor: the "costs" of sending children to school, 2002, in process).

A further area where it is usual for government to set standards is in what expectations parents and students may have of how far they have to travel to primary school. These vary from country to country, and are sometimes expressed in terms of physical distance (e.g. within 3 km of home) or of time walking (eg less than an hour's walk). It is also usual to find national goals for student:teacher ratios set by Central Government, and often with expectations of time related reductions e.g from current 1:50 to 1:45 in five years and 1:40 in ten years. This then links to plans for school building programmes, teacher training programmes, and increasingly, in SSA particularly, to projections for teaching staff in light of HIV/AIDS deaths. These are generally Government responsibilities, although the work of modelling projected needs may be contracted out to private specialists – or technical assistance provided through development partner activities.

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is a considerable challenge until such time as the infrastructure of the poorest nations meets the needs of all its people equally. In an age when access to computers and being able to use computer-based communication is becoming a dominant requirement for successful entrepreneurship and to function in the mainstream of society innovative public/private linkages may present ways towards greater equity. NB the Infundo project of DFID.

## **Government policy**

How successful governments are at a) policy development and planning strategies to meet those policies, and b) seeing the implementation of programmes and monitoring their outcomes is highly variable. One of the areas which have been researched in this respect is on the mainstreaming of education strategies to meet gender equity or equality goals. A three country comparative study on gender equality in education showed that policy is often well considered and these issues are comprehensively addressed in government policy statements. However, what was equally well demonstrated is the limited success in the implementation of policies. The phrase borrowed to describe this phenomenon is ‘policy evaporation’: a macro policy statement is translated into activities and those activities are then delivered through the meso level intermediaries; by the time they reach the micro level, the school, they have more or less evaporated. They are no longer the focus of attention while hard-pressed, under-resourced, poorly supervised and supported staff struggle with their own implementation priorities. It is these areas where state provision is often most criticised. The centralisation of control of resources and decision-making is the main focus of criticism, not so much the policy development, the rule making, the standard setting, but how those policies, rules and standards are implemented, maintained and their effectiveness monitored in formative and structured ways.

From these examples of where state involvement is most consistent and most supportive of UBE we might, arguably, suggest that universal access to schooling of a consistent, reliable and acceptable standard can only be provided with Government involvement. This does not mean that all provision has to be through government agents, nor does all provision have to be funded through a central taxation system.<sup>6</sup> For example, a discussion of the virtues of non-government primary education centres has been introduced above.

## **Whole School Development: School improvement planning**

The concepts of whole school development and of school improvement (or development) planning (SIP/SDP) have considerable support within the education policy discourse. Deconcentrating control and management of standards and resource distribution and use, and devolving responsibility for management of schools to the local level (self-governing schools)

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<sup>6</sup> Governments are generally perceived to be the providers of mass education, with private provision available for specific purposes (specialist schools such as music academies, art and drama, where academic studies accompany a main pursuit for those with particular talents or aptitudes), or for specific population sub-groups (religious bodies, for example Koranic schools) or for socio-economic elites (such as the British Public School system). (This list is not exhaustive.) Private schooling is often perceived to be (and sometimes but not exclusively is) of a higher standard than the state provided system. However, there are some illustrative examples of where the reverse is the case. 96% of all secondary schools in Bangladesh are privately financed, and are only accessible to a small percentage of the population, and to females who receive scholarships and bursaries to attend. In Indonesia, private schools play a key role in educational delivery at junior secondary level and the achievement of the government’s UBE target is dependent on their existence. Far from providing the prestigious and sought-after education often associated with private provision, they are unable to provide the quality of education equivalent to that offered by government schools. It is reported that falling rolls in private schools as students move to new government schools are affecting their ability to continue delivering schooling. The seemingly unregulated setting up of new government schools close to existing private schools is decreasing the efficiency of the whole system to deliver quality education to all Indonesian children. Far from working together in pursuit of the UBE goals there seems to be little understanding of the dynamics of the relationship between the two providers.

with variable degrees of authority suited to the context (for teacher appointments for example), may present ways forward. Experiences vary, but are generally positive and encouraging. The emphasis on enabling schools to access resources beyond the government sector, to become self-managing schools, within a context of strengthened local democracy, and with greater accountability to the local population, appears to have the potential to improve quality appropriate to the local requirements.

This section will look at the following areas:

1. The international context of School Improvement Planning (SIP)
2. Some examples of SIP/SDP (school development planning) in practice
3. Some lessons to learn from the international experience

### **Definition**

We need to first look at the definition of SIP - what does it mean? It is worth noting that SIPs are closely related to School Development Planning (SDP), a term which is often used for a similar approach to devolving power to the local level. SIP and SDP can be defined as the active involvement of the school and its community in identifying and meeting school-determined goals in the context of local or national policies and goals (the latter are described below). The emphasis is on schools setting their own realistic targets for development and using their own resources, as well as state resources, to meet those targets. As such, it covers all aspects of schooling from teaching and learning, to choices about equipment and staff training.

School Improvement Planning is sometimes used interchangeably with SDP and there is no real difference, but SIP is more commonly used to refer to schools whose 'hardware' needs have been met and who are primarily focusing on their 'software' needs.

### **International Context of SDPs**

School Development Planning has been around for two or three decades in different forms. Within the last ten years it has gained currency as it has been introduced in more developed country systems. Many developing countries are now also introducing this approach.

Countries using or in the process of introducing SDP/SIP include: UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, parts of the US, the Netherlands, Portugal, Hong Kong, and South Africa. You will notice that not many of these are in developing countries. However, there are many countries where these are now on the policy discussion agenda, and some at more advanced stages than others. Bangladesh and India are introducing school development initiatives and there are some lessons to learn from those countries. Nepal is introducing a block grant funding scheme to schools which is accompanied by an incipient SIP strategy. In some counties in China there is quite an advanced stage of SIP design based on lessons learned from implementation, and similarly so in Jamaica. In Tanzania, different approaches to SDPs or SIPs have been attempted in different Districts, with variable results.

SIP/SDP has been introduced for a variety of reasons in these countries, but there are some common characteristics. These characteristics are interlinked and operate to varying degrees in different countries. They are classified as follows:

Macro Economic Reasons  
Political Reasons  
Economic / Efficiency Reasons  
Participation and Equity Reasons  
Educational Reasons

### ***Macro Economic Reasons***

In the last 30/40 years in developed countries there has been a rapid change from state intervention and control, to an increasing role for the free market, even in areas once the monopoly of the public sector e.g. - telephones, water, power (electricity and gas), and transport. So called privatisation of these services has occurred in developed countries for example America, the UK and Australia in the 1980s and 1990s. Privatisation is said to encourage competition, but it is also a kind of decentralisation of government power - it encourages people to look to alternatives to central control. People in these countries gradually got used to the idea that various aspects of life - aspects of public service once undertaken by large government departments or monopolies - could also be undertaken by small firms or by local companies. This was a change in attitudes, a change in thinking. Education is a mirror of society and it was not long before changes happening in the commercial sector started to have an impact on the education sector.

### ***Political Reasons***

In some countries SIP began as part of the movement for decentralisation of the control of education. In different countries this took different forms. In the UK for example the introduction of SDP by a right wing government was very clearly an attempt to reduce the involvement (and politicisation) of county education authorities who were at that time largely in the control of left wing politicians. In Sri Lanka the current programme of decentralisation in education is intended to mirror the political decentralisation of power to provinces - this has roots in the conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese (which at the time of writing is encouragingly in abeyance). In South Africa the moves to school development planning have part of their roots in the desire to give the traditionally excluded black population control over their local services.

### ***Economic/Efficiency***

Another key argument used in favour of SIPs is an economic/efficiency argument. By giving schools control of their budgets (or a large part of the budget) it is argued that decision-making about spending priorities is more informed and better targeted. E.g. in the UK in the 1980s if a school window was broken the head teacher had to wait for the county authority to send someone to fix it - now they can hire someone themselves and negotiate the price. Now, they can decide how to allocate the budget within the school, before the budget was allocated for them. This delegation of financial control is seen as increasing the efficiency of the school in the way it operates by having spending decisions taken at the lowest level of the education system. Moreover it is seen as an efficient mechanism for distributing funds to meet stated educational goals. This is returned to later. Another efficiency argument for SDP is that it promotes

"managerial efficiency" - the literature on school effectiveness tells us that effective schools are well managed schools.

### *Participation and Equity*

More recently, SIP has been seen - especially in developing rather than developed countries - as a mechanism for involvement of communities in solving educational problems. It has been seen as a tool for gaining support for education from communities, for raising resources and for ensuring local accountability. In systems where there remain problems of access this can be especially useful - it can lead to the participation of groups who normally feel excluded or who are said to not value education highly. Schools are encouraged to be responsible to the communities they serve. However, there is also a danger that the opposite will occur if the state is transferring all responsibility for gathering resource to the school/community level, rather than from centrally collected and distributed taxation systems. Those in 'communities' who are unable to contribute the necessary resources are as excluded from the locally owned schooling process as they were or are from centrally implemented systems.

In more developed countries there is also an emphasis on community participation in school development - this is usually manifested through participation by parents and community representatives (e.g. religious leaders) on Boards of Governors. However, there is also an emphasis on parental involvement in learning through support at home and also in the delivery of teaching and support in the classroom.

### *Educational Reasons*

Last, but certainly not least, there are strong educational reasons for the promotion of SIP.

1. Firstly, the very process of planning forces school staff and parents to articulate and define what the schools goals and priorities are
2. Secondly, SIP makes schools and teachers accountable to themselves and to others for the education they are delivering to children. This in turn highlights weaknesses and can be used to target efforts to improve the situation.
3. Thirdly, planning and reviewing of actual achievements encourages reflection. Reflective teachers and reflective schools are sensitive to the school environment they create and the responsibilities they personally and collectively have.

### *Summary*

None of the characteristics described above **on its own** necessarily explains why countries have introduced SIP/SDP: it is usually some combination of these factors. But, in almost all cases a common characteristic has been the delegation of some resources - usually financial - to the control of the school. Without such delegation the increased responsibility passed on to schools as a result of SDP is like asking someone to cook a meal without any food: they produce the menu and the recipes but no meal on the table.

## **Some Examples of SIP/SDP**

### **The Specific Case of the UK**

1. SDP came via Local Management of Schools (LMS) which introduced delegated school budgets
2. At the same time new inspection system judged schools partly on the goals they set themselves within the national policy framework and targets
3. Increased powers and accountability for Boards of Governors made school development planning an important tool on which everyone could agree direction, targets and whether those had been achieved.

In fact, in the UK financial delegation came before school development planning and it was the greatly increased control that schools had over their own budgets that made SDP an important tool of school planning.

As a result of these changes head teachers needed a great deal of training and support in their new duties. LMS was not popular initially as head teachers felt they were being drawn away from their educational responsibilities. 10 years later most head teachers are strongly in favour of LMS, welcome the control and flexibility of decision making it gives them and believe that schools are better managed, with the result that the overall quality of education delivery has risen.

### **Specific case of Gansu Province in China**

SDP is being introduced in four of the poorest counties of Gansu Province in China. These counties are characterised by large ethnic minority populations, and high levels of poverty. They are remote and mountainous suffering extremes of climate. Below are described some reflections on the Gansu experience, in the following structure:

1. What are the common characteristics of SDP in Gansu with the descriptions of international practice just given?
2. What were the original intentions of introducing SDP during the design of the project?
3. What have been the experiences of implementation?

### **Common characteristics**

- A macro-economic situation in China in the last ten years which has emphasised reduction of state control and increasing privatisation or semi-privatisation of once publicly provided services.
- A political situation which supports decentralisation of powers to provinces and counties, but with the centre retaining considerable control over policy
- An increasing interest in school - community links as a way of solving the problems of access still prevalent in poorer areas.
- A strong history of planning, of setting goals and targets - but most of this coming from the top rather than the bottom.

## **Differences**

There are some differences between the characteristics described above and the four counties in Gansu. There is less emphasis on the economic efficiency characteristics of SDPs as there are worries about how to control the delegation of financial powers to schools.

The reality of financial decentralisation is also limited in poor counties who are net recipients of funds from the province.

There is currently little political motivation. Giving greater control to schools is not yet seen as a benefit to the education system.

Conditions in China are favourable to the introduction of SDP, but the specific approach which is right for the four counties in Gansu is still in the process of development. This example usefully demonstrates the need to match the design of the SDP/SIP approach to suit the needs of the particular location. It is not possible to take a ready made design and use that without amendment in another context. Local needs and the state of development of the education system in those places must be taken into account if SDP/SIP is to be introduced.

## **What were the original intentions?**

The original intentions of the project were to use SDP as a vehicle for improving the link between schools and their communities to help solve issues of access. It was expected that this process would help schools look at their own problems and ask what they could do about them. It was anticipated that, if the experiment was successful, some or all schools might move to some form of partial control over their own non-personnel budgets.

SDP was also seen as a mechanism by which schools could look at all aspects of their development, including teaching and learning - but it was recognised that many schools would, in the initial period of the project, be obsessed with hardware rather than software issues.

Finally, an essential feature of SDP is the reform of county level budgeting for education - known as the two commitments (increased allocations from the county budget to education and increased allocations to non-personnel expenditures within the education budget). The intention of this reform is to ensure that there will be sufficient funds for SDP to continue in the future after the project has ended.

## **Does Gansu Make Services Work for the Poor?**

Those original intentions remain for the Gansu four counties' SDPs. However, implementation of the SDP process has produced results which provide lessons for others to consider.

The first 18 months of SDP in Gansu was very successful. There are many stories of active community participation, of schools creating strong links with parents which has resulted in more children attending school and of schools coming to understand the communities they serve better. But, - in reality probably only about 50% of the schools have done SDPs as intended. For many schools SDP is still seen as a vehicle for delivery of project funds, not as a means of school

development. It is a mechanism which is accepted, but not fully embraced as the policy developers had hoped.

In the next two years they are hoping for change. Their optimism relates to expected outcomes as schools focus less on hardware issues and more on software, as more and more teachers are trained in new methods and continue upgrading their skills, as head teachers are gradually trained in more modern management methods and as the new inspection system being piloted helps schools to review and assess the progress they are making towards their own targets. In other words, and of relevance internationally, simply introducing SDP for schools and communities of itself is necessary but not sufficient to get positive and sustained results. There is a range of other concurrent activities that are essential if the whole is to be successful.

In Gansu there is still a long way to go, and in particular the linking of SDP with county budget changes needs much more work and greater understanding. The four counties have committed themselves to putting more money into the education budget each year, and most importantly more money into the non-personnel budget. These commitments are not easy - but they are central to the sustainability of SDP and the development of schools in the four counties after the end of the project. (Expenditure choices are always difficult - whether in a developed or developing country - there is never enough money to make everyone satisfied).

This additional money will help to maintain the spending on teaching - learning materials, scholarships and building maintenance which is currently provided by donor funds. Without these commitments - and their continuation beyond the project life, the schools will climb a ladder to a new level, only to find the ladder taken away from them.

## **Key lessons and discussion points**

### **Devolved resource responsibility**

Perhaps one of the key lessons from looking at SDPs internationally is that they have all been accompanied by delegation of resources to schools. This is the incentive that gives schools some real control over their own development and the reward for being asked to take on additional responsibility. This does not necessarily mean cash and there are a range of options which can meet the goal of devolving some financial responsibility while retaining a measure of control against mis-management.

Giving schools responsibility for setting budgets can be a first step, giving them control over a proportion of the budget can be another. Giving some funds in direct grants - either budgetary or extra-budgetary can be another - giving full control over the entire budget is not necessarily the best way forward. This has not even happened in English schools despite their long experience of SDP. Note, though, that this 'giving of control' is essentially a political decision, which is returned to below.

However, some commentators have noted that devolving financial controls can be problematic in countries where there is a traditionally strong central control. One solution, adopted in India for example, is to devolve budgetary responsibilities to **clusters of schools**, rather than individual schools. A similar approach has been used in one of the Nigerian States where a pilot community school development project has been implemented. From this financial year (2002/2003) Nepal is introducing a block grant system for social services through local government. This is to be

accompanied by a SIP process, with schools responsible for planning and managing their school's activities. The production of a three-year budgeted plan will be used to determine their right to receive funding and the level of the block grant. Given the current security situation in Nepal, the likelihood of this being successfully implemented in its first year is highly dubious. Depending on the success or otherwise of the implementation of the block grant modality, the Indian experience of cluster funding may be worth considering in Nepal where the school district could be a natural vehicle for such an arrangement.

Another key lesson is the need for contextualisation. It is not possible to take a ready made design and use that without amendment in another context. Local needs and the state of development of the education system in those places must be taken into account if SDP/SIP is to be introduced successfully.

### **Politics and power**

Political will is a pre-requisite for successful implementation of a SDP process. This is as significant at local level as at central government. At central level, a willingness to devolve power to lower levels is necessary. This, as mentioned above, includes a demonstration of their confidence in the school and its management structure (whatever that might be) to the school, with the allocation of funds under their direct control. This also represents a political commitment to support education for the poorest. Further, sufficient resources are required to ensure that the burden of funding, managing and supervising service delivery does not fall on the poorest – that the government does not transfer responsibility from themselves to those least able to cope without the necessary transfer of adequate resources.

The desire for the active involvement of the school and its community in identifying and meeting school-determined goals, setting their own realistic targets for development and using their own resources, as well as state resources, to meet those targets involves considerable political (and Political) negotiation and accommodation. There is often a considerable realignment of perceptions required from all sides: the mutual mis-trust often voiced in participatory assessments of school quality has to be addressed. The teachers blame the parents for being ignorant and not interested in their children's education. Parents blame teachers for being crooks, being unmotivated and for not teaching their children properly. Unpacking these assumptions reveals a lack of knowledge of the other, that the accusations are often based on hearsay, rumour or otherwise unfounded beliefs. Overcoming this notion of the other requires a realignment of thinking, which can be engendered through the use of PA methods, and the dissemination of more grounded information. The methods used in the Gansu project SDPs illustrate this well, with considerable successes.

In addition, the locus of power is known to be elsewhere: for the parents it lies in the school; for the head teacher it lies in the school inspector and with the government education officers. Depending on the country in question, it may well lie with the representative body at the local level, such as and for example, the Village Development Committee (VDC) in Nepal or the Upazilla Education Development Committee in Bangladesh. Resources channelled through these bodies give them considerable power, and the Chairmen (sic) have the 'power' vested in them of the democratic electoral system. This power may well be in conflict with, or not supportive of, the expressed wishes of head teachers and/or the schools' representative body (school management committee, the parent-teachers association, school board etc). Teachers are often members of their own representative bodies (trade unions or professional bodies), who may also

have a separate set of priorities and power relationships. Accommodating these sometimes diverse and possibly contradictory priorities, needs and desires, requires considerable sensitivity on the part of those responsible for developing policy, and those who implement the policy - the middle managers. The (usually new) set of skills required to include and meet these disparate needs at all levels require, in turn, a change in the way the roles of the education officers and certain cadres are viewed. Skills in participatory needs assessment, in qualitative data collection, in facilitating action research at school level and so on, are not mainstreamed skills, but need to become so.

A rather extreme example of political conflict interfering with local processes is demonstrated in Nepal. Schools have been a considerable focus for the Maoist movement, and local activists have recruited teachers and students to their cause – or, indeed, teachers are at the forefront of the movement in some locations. Where teachers or headteachers are known to disagree they have suffered the severest of consequences with many deaths of teachers in remote area schools. Note, too, that included in the schools forced to close were the private schools; however, the urban location and fact that they did not represent a government service (the government, along with the Monarchy, being the main focus of Maoist disquiet) meant they were not the first affected. Less extreme, but in the same country, school planning processes have been undermined because the head teacher and the VDC chair belong to different political parties. Although the VDC has funds to spend on schools they refuse to do so if there is no congruence of political allegiance. Despite community involvement in determining schools' planning priorities, these priorities cannot be addressed because of local political decision-making.<sup>7</sup> Where there is congruence of political affiliation schools have been supported, and the school planning processes have demonstrated considerable successes.

### **Community – whose voice?**

Who, exactly, gets to participate in these 'community' events, in the SDP development? How representative are school bodies of the various community groups? This does vary considerably, in part depending on how well established the structures are and what rules and regulations they have to abide by. In developing countries there are often problems of effective female representation and participation in public bodies. It is quite common to find only one woman on a committee, overwhelmed and unable to voice her opinion. In most places there is now a recognition of the importance of having the silent half of the parent body (mothers) able to engage in decision-making, especially as it is generally considered that they are more in touch with their children's views, fears, and expectations. Everywhere it is the case that the poorer a household the less likely it is that they will be able to commit time and resources in order to participate in school planning and management. They are often marginalised by their poverty, politically and economically. Realistically, it is unlikely that any management body is going to

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<sup>7</sup> The claim of 'political interference' is often made by schools who are frustrated at not being able to control what happens in their own institution. This is a reality in many countries where, for example, teachers are selected for who they know rather than what they know, or the opposite, where teachers are not permitted to practice when local political parties object to their appointment. At middle management level there may also be a problem where there is no separation of the administration and legislature. Political appointments of officers (civil servants) change with a change in political party in power, or at the whim of a local politician or minister either to reward or punish individuals. Not only does this undermine any development of trust locally, it also inhibits skills development and knowledge dissemination and consolidation. Building of institutional memory (essential for making rational local policy and planning decisions) is constrained.

be have a membership which is truly inclusive. However, what they can be is sensitive to the need to find out about, to gather information and opinions from, to permit the voices of all groups to be heard through intermediaries. Overcoming the negative perceptions of the literate about the illiterate is a prerequisite if this is to be a reality.

### **Avoiding inequity**

One of the major concerns about giving responsibilities to schools for planning and managing their own schools and resources is the potential for increasing rather than decreasing inequities in service provision. Even where schools may be provided the same inputs, the fact that they are able and encouraged to raise their own complementary resources immediately puts the better schools in higher socio-economic areas at an advantage over those in the poorest areas. In Nepal this was demonstrated in one rural area where several schools were comparing their planning outcomes. In this case the plans were not comprehensive, not expected to be so, and were not accompanied by government resources (although they could apply for local funds). They were asked to identify activities they could undertake from their own local resources. This meant that the outcomes were very varied, linked to motivation (often of the head teacher who is frequently a catalyst for positive activities), and to the level of resources available. One school development committee whose catchment area included the poorest villages was clearly desperate to prove their ability to make positive changes to their school. Their description of their half finished roof, provided with local funds, and their inability to complete the work because there were no further funding avenues for them to pursue was distressing. This illustrates the potentially iniquitous results that can occur when local resources are relied on – or when local resources supplement provision.

One possible way around this is to ensure that resource allocation mechanisms include poverty indicators and are not based simply on head counts. This still cannot address the problem that some local communities will be able to engage much more realistically in the SDP process than others. However, a combination of weighted allocations and raising awareness of local level policy makers and planners to the need to support the marginalised to a greater extent than the more accessible and resource endowed can in many ways overcome the danger of increasing disparities.

### **Long-term changes**

International experience indicates that SDP can be a very successful and powerful force for change in education, can contribute towards making education services work for poor people. However, it needs at least 3/4 years to implement properly and is most successful when accompanied by some form of financial delegation to schools. It takes considerable time to make SDP part of the school's daily work and for it to be seen as a tool of development. Complementary reforms in inspection, teacher training and school financing are also needed to ensure success.

### **Other examples of SDP implementation**

Further examples of developing countries introducing SDP/SIP which may be of interest to the reader are:

- ✧ The Imbewu I project in South Africa. Materials describing this project and a video have been produced.
- ✧ A WB project in Cambodia

- ◇ A DFID funded project is introducing SDP in Jamaica.

### **Summary**

In general, state provision of schooling is most likely to meet the needs of mass education, to make the most significant contribution towards achieving UBE goals. Particularly during periods of transition of states to more developed status there will be groups of children, pockets of the population, who are unable to access schooling, and it is these who are best served by non-government providers. Private schooling is usually, but not always and everywhere, schooling for the urban child, and/or the socio-economically advantaged. Whilst inputs to increase access of children to school (more schools, more classrooms, more teachers, more text books and other teaching and learning materials) has been the focus of attention of governments and international development partners with some resulting enrolment success stories, the processes of schooling have received less attention. It is to these that attention has to be turned if services are to work for the poor. What teachers are teaching, how they are teaching, when they are teaching and how effectively they engage children in learning are the central themes, wrapped around with continuing teacher development programmes, supportive academic supervision processes within school (the role of the head teacher) and from the system (school supervisors or inspectors). Involvement of parents, and of community representatives, in monitoring and managing teaching and learning processes has been shown to make a considerable contribution to improvements to the quality of the education provided by governments – and refocuses the school's attention on the child's and her or his parents' needs rather than the needs of the provider.

**Table One**

**PURPOSE OF EDUCATION**

<b>The purpose of education</b>	<b>How measured, who judges</b>	<b>Success for the poorest?</b>	<b>Comment</b>
As a means to an end Macro aims: social and economic improvements	IMR, LE, MM, TFR etc. GDP  Policy makers; development partners	Slow progress, variable, wide disparities: generally no.	Those who have access to private education in urban centres most likely to ‘succeed’, but not the poorest. More likely other factors influencing outcomes not private education per se
As a means to an end Household demand for qualifications to enter the job market	Examination pass rates; Unemployment/employment  Parents and students	Gender bias – generally a demand for male qualifications. Urban, privately tutored, parent-supported successes: generally no	Quality of education is often measured by parents in terms of exam outcomes. This is not restricted to developing countries. The ‘tail wagging the dog’ – syllabuses geared to passing exams, not to child learning and child development
As an end in itself: as a fundamental human right, or education for education’s sake	NER, democratic systems, respect for intellectuals  Individuals, intellectuals, international organisations	An important stimulus towards recognising the validity that all children should access quality schooling, but still a long way to go to achieve goals.	The ‘Rights’ agenda has influenced the setting of international development goals such as EFA and UBE.
To perpetuate cultural practices	(Disaggregated NER); language of instruction; teacher identity; appropriate curriculum  Parents and children in minority cultures	Formal systems generally fail, although initiatives such as the use of local languages for early learning and supporting minorities teachers have some support	Teachers from majority cultures often have little empathy (sometimes antipathy) for minority children (eg ‘untouchables’). Too much emphasis eg through some NGO schools, some religious based schools, perpetuates disadvantage as well as cultural practice.
To create a national identity	Core curriculum, text books, uniform and standardised system  Politicians	NICs suggest macro-economic success, but questionable how the poorest fare.	Some evidence that this strategy is used to overcome national divisions e.g. Sri Lanka, South Africa