

Comments on EFA FTI Global and Regional Activities Program (GRA) Thematic Area: Out of School Children

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Framework for deciding priorities

At the moment a good range of issues affecting out of school children are raised under the three main headings of the paper, but it is difficult to see from the paper which areas are most important for the GRA to prioritise funding around. Recommended activities for GRA to support should be focused on analysis of where action can make the biggest difference to education access barriers affecting large numbers, and key groups, of out of school children.

To do this it would be helpful to develop a narrower framework for analysis of gaps around access barriers. A more focused analytical framework would be likely to generate more relevant responses from broader consultation.

Rather than listing the different characteristics of many out of school children, it would be useful to clarify that several groups of children are out of school because the way education systems are structured excludes them or is not relevant to their situations and learning needs. Many children are also out of school because other factors outside the remit of the education system keep them out of school.

One of the ways to narrow the analysis would be to start with considering these supply side and demand side access challenges separately, as the types of activities which GRA could fund in response would most likely be led by different types of agencies. A twin track analysis would help in identifying the gaps under each area - what are the main gaps in terms of what education systems can do better, and what are the main gaps in terms of barriers to access that are outside the remit of education systems?

Then it would also be helpful if the paper could focus discussion more tightly around the following:

1. Areas which are likely to yield the most 'quick wins' for GRA investment
2. Areas related to the access barriers affecting the largest numbers of children
3. Areas related to the most entrenched or complex access barriers affecting out of school children.

It would also be helpful to focus on the access challenges which are least well researched, but where the experience of practitioners points to major challenges. Another area of priority could be access challenges that are well evidenced, but are not being tackled effectively within countries most affected by access barriers.

Data

Focusing funded activities on countries which are making strong efforts to prioritise and grow their education and demographic data systems would be particularly helpful. Support should be identified for countries to build in good practice that will be more likely to promote the right kind of data gathering to identify and diagnose challenges for out of school children.

This is likely to mean supporting national data systems which deliver stronger disaggregation by gender and disability; better tracking of children in and out of education and within different parts of countries; and better incorporation of data into local, regional and national government education and social protection planning systems; as well as better linking and analysis capacity for household survey and EMIS data to complement each other.

Disability should be a key focus of any activities to strengthen data approaches for out of school children. There is clear agreement within the FTI and EFA communities that without data on disabled people government planning and response in relation to their needs is unlikely to improve radically.

Also vital is countries' capacity to regulate and plan for the right type of education which will meet the needs of excluded children. For example, in conflict affected countries where many children missed out on primary school, substantial investment in non formal accelerated learning centres for overage children and young adults is likely to be needed for some time to come within the mainstream education system.

I'd suggest that activities under 'data and planning' or 'data and response' should be considered instead of data alone. Planning and budgeting for accessible school infrastructure and routes to school for girls and children with disabilities will be important; as will planning and budgeting for the language needs of diverse linguistic groups; and planning for the right levels of flexibility to allow locally relevant curricula. Investigating the value of incorporating participatory local education data and planning approaches such as C-EMIS into local government planning systems would be a valuable area for the GRA to support the production of evidence and guidance around.

Any providers selected under data should have strong capacity on issues of disability and gender.

Policy

The current focus on policy gaps is very broad, and perhaps misses the crux of what is going wrong with access to education in many countries. Many countries have strongly inclusive policies that are not being implemented, or that are poorly understood: the biggest gaps actually seem to be around information systems, planning and budgeting systems, education management capacities, and coordination and collaboration across service delivery sectors and between government and communities.

Even if countries could get a clearer view on which children were most marginalised and why, they wouldn't necessarily prioritise tackling their exclusion politically or have the money or system capacity to do so. Clear understanding of what drives national governments and local educators in making or resisting changes to schooling to welcome more children is needed. More work is needed on drivers for investing in making the changes that will enable the education of excluded groups in different contexts.

I don't feel that the activities recommended under policy are necessarily the most relevant or strategic for GRA funding in the area of out of school children. However, it would be useful to have a section on demand side barriers to access for out of school children, and consider the role that policy formulation and implementation is playing in that.

On the demand side, it is clear from stakeholder feedback and research that if the quality of teachers and schools is not good enough; if it's in a language that children don't understand or communities don't want; and if the curriculum is not relevant to communities' current and likely future situation, it is not worth poor families making the sacrifices needed to put their children into school. GRA support could very usefully synthesise the evidence base on these questions for national policy makers and education managers to take on board, and could produce good practice advice on curriculum adaptation, nonformal education policy and so on.

Management

A lot of key issues are explored under this heading, but again it would be good to focus down on the most strategic areas for GRA engagement. It is not clear at present where the list of challenges related to management capacities come from, nor how big a role they play in keeping children out of school. It would be helpful to identify which management issues are likely to respond well to GRA support and are likely to have the biggest impact on out of school children.

I'd suggest that local management and planning capacity, already identified in the paper, should be given more emphasis, including local government capacity to collaborate with communities for more efficient and inclusive education monitoring, planning and resourcing. Identifying the best ways to support local education management capacity in decentralised education systems will be important.

A point that needs more emphasis is the intersection of supply and demand side barriers to access. This is likely to require far more effort and planning across sectors than has currently been the case. For example, girls affected by early marriage, unsympathetic teaching practices and lack of school toilets are disadvantage in multiple ways which will take significant coordination to fix. Learning from and piloting new ways to strengthen this coordination could be a very useful feature of GRA work to strengthen management of education related to out of school children. Research and documentation could be useful around where such collaboration between different arms of governments and civil society is making positive progress.

The development and piloting of new guidelines and operational models on local education management are mostly not needed, as there is a huge amount of activity in this area. Instead, focusing funding on reviews and investigations to find out which guidelines and operational models are working best to sustainably promote effective, inclusive local education management in different settings would be very helpful. This should include a focus on how participatory school improvement mechanisms are making education management more effective and inclusive, and what role local civil society organisations have been playing and can play to increase the effectiveness and inclusivity of education management and planning processes. Having a focus on what types of models, processes and guidelines are working in crisis affected countries would be helpful.

Poverty and survival barriers to school

At the moment, a set of important supply side challenges are listed within the 'Management' section, but I'd suggest that these are given a clear heading themselves and that activities relating to supply side challenges are given top priority by GRA work.

It would be more helpful to separate out many of the issues that currently get conflated under 'poverty'. Save the Children's research and analysis in countries with the largest numbers of children out of school point to a huge number of issues related to the inability of families to take part in education. More research is needed into the extent to which non education barriers keep children out of school, and therefore the extent to which action is needed outside education policy, planning and financing.

Consultation and analysis from the Young Lives consortium and Save the Children's education access research indicate that there are major demand side barriers keeping children out of school. These include children having to spend their days finding food for their family's survival; children who have no clothes to wear to school; children who have to work full time to keep the family afloat. In settings severely affected by HIV/AIDS, natural disaster, conflict and extreme economic deprivation, the indications from initial research and practitioner experience are that these barriers will require substantial inputs to provide the support which children and families need to take part in any activity other than basic survival.

There is little clear data or analysis on the scale of different supply side problems in the contexts furthest from the MDGs, and on what potential solutions can have the most impact in low capacity and low resource contexts. More work is needed on evidencing and piloting the extent to which social protection schemes such as conditional cash transfers can be delivered in the contexts furthest from the MDGs with the biggest demand side access barriers.

Providers with experience of conditional cash transfers and working in emergency or conflict affected settings should be prioritised for work in this area.