



SWAps Policy Brief

Education outcomes

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Overview of research

Just over a decade since the introduction of education sector-wide approaches (SWAps), CfBT Education Trust has conducted research to review their global progress since the Ratcliffe and Macrae (1999) publication, commissioned by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, entitled *Sector Wide Approaches to Education: A Strategic Analysis*. Since 1999 there has been a lack of rigorous, comprehensive, global analysis regarding the effectiveness of SWAps drawing on the national, international and thematically focused literature. As a result, this research seeks to fill this gap by highlighting key historical trends, presenting new findings from the global literature as well as emerging good practice from the field for the first time. It also looks at the implications of the research for the future of SWAps. The research comprised a desk review of the global literature, as well as the grey literature on SWAps complemented by stakeholder interviews. The publication, *The impact of sector-wide approaches: where from, where now and where to?* from which this policy brief is taken, analyses the evolution of SWAps and their relationship with: (i) aid effectiveness; (ii) planning and financing; (iii) education outcomes; and (iv) fragility.

This policy brief summarises the relationship between SWAps and education outcomes.

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SWAps have focused more strongly on governance than on education outcomes

Owing to the complexity of designing and implementing SWAps, much focus to date has been on coordination and on improving national governance (Shepherd and Cabral, 2008). This has distracted both donor and partner government attention from service delivery outcomes particularly related to quality, although this focus is increasingly being redressed.

There is a lack of studies that assess the impact of SWAps

Due to the nature of educational change, it is difficult to attribute any improvements or downward trend in education outcomes to the implementation of SWAps. It is generally felt that there is greater evidence of the impact of SWAps on outcomes in the health sector. Nevertheless, the research found there were substantial data gaps when analysing the impact of health SWAps in 11 low-income countries on vaccination rates, antenatal care, infant and child mortality as well as tuberculosis detection and treatment. Moreover, there is a lack of longitudinal studies measuring the impact of SWAps and education reform programmes on school-level outcomes (Penny, Ward, Read and Bines, 2008). This is troubling given that donors are under increasing pressure from their parliaments to demonstrate the tangible results of their aid in quantitative terms (Haddad, 2010).

SWAps have been strongly associated with large-scale increases in access

SWAps have been strongly associated with the national expansion of fee-free basic education service delivery and, in some cases, post-basic education. This has been as a result of the fact that national and international sector financing has been channelled in more efficient and effective ways, enabling the abolition of school fees in several countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda and Uganda, dramatically scaling up the reach of the formal education system. SWAps have therefore had a very positive impact on expanding access for children, particularly at the primary level (for example in Uganda) and in some cases on improving equity (for example in Bangladesh) and gender parity.

While SWAps have helped to mainstream approaches to tackle inequitable participation, they have not adequately addressed demand-side challenges to education access

SWAps have provided the opportunity and framework for mainstreaming approaches to reaching children who are marginalised owing to their mother tongue, ethnicity, caste, gender, rural location, class or disability (UNICEF, 2006). However, the absence of classification systems of vulnerable groups around which there is consensus, and which do not further stigmatise, is an ongoing challenge for partner governments, due to the political sensitivities of categorising groups as well as the limitations of education management information systems. Ministry of education officials may perceive equity-related programmes to be a distraction from the 'real work' of formal education. In addition, poorly harmonised approaches to (i) gender parity and gender equality, and (ii) the need for mainstreaming or targeted approaches amongst donors, have led to fragmented policy advice to ministries of education. The extent to which gender mainstreaming is successful is strongly linked to the ways in which relevant staff are institutionalised and embedded (or not) within the ministry of education at national, sub-national and school levels (OECD, 2002; Seel, 2007). Despite the impressive increases in access which SWAps have facilitated, important challenges remain regarding how to reach the remaining out-of-school children. This points to one of the shortcomings of SWAps, namely an inability to address the entrenched demand-side barriers to children's access as well as their inadequate engagement with non-state actors and resourcing for the non-formal sub-sector (Shepherd and Cabral, 2008).

SWAps do not yet have a positive track record on quality

There has not been a positive spill-over effect from governance improvements on indicators of education quality (Ratcliffe, 2007). The research showed that children's learning achievements have actually deteriorated following the introduction of SWAps. This needs to be considered within the context of the massive increases in enrolment due to the introduction of fee-free primary or basic education, after which a downward trend in quality was inevitable. It is also necessary to take into account that national data on children's learning achievements may be unreliable due to the non-alignment of the curriculum taught during the year with the knowledge and skills assessed in the exams. Moreover, exam results may not be comparable across a series of academic years, let alone between countries. Nevertheless, Cambodia showed reduced drop-out rates from primary, lower secondary and upper secondary between 2005/2006 and 2008/2009 as well as a reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio (MoEYS, 2006; MoEYS, 2010).

Involving teachers more directly in the design and implementation of SWAps is critical to addressing quality

The research revealed the importance of a nationally defined understanding of and vision for education in relation to the country's broader economic needs and social development (Kuder, 2005; Penny et al., 2008). The role of teachers in the design and implementation of SWAps was found to be vital. Indeed, there is evidence that where teachers are not involved, they can be a formidable stumbling block to SWAp implementation (Seel, 2007). The research also revealed that the focus of technical assistance has often been on building institutional capacity rather than on areas which are likely to have a positive short- and long-term impact on quality such as teacher education, curriculum revision and the teaching and learning process in schools. It is clear that unless there is a changed approach in the design and focus of SWAps, education outcomes, particularly those related to learning achievements, may not improve in the long term.

Key finding

SWAps have played a pivotal role in enabling dramatic increases in the provision of and enrolment in fee-free primary education in low-income countries; nevertheless, the track record is less positive in relation to the impact on learning achievements.

Recommendation 1

Donors and ministries of education need to allow time during the SWAp preparation stage for national debates regarding the purpose and meaning of education. Donors should ensure that in-country staff have sufficient education expertise to participate meaningfully in discussions regarding effective strategies to improve quality at the classroom level.

Recommendation 2

Ministries of education need to involve key agents of change within the teaching and learning process in the SWAp design process – namely, teachers, teacher unions and school management committee members – in order to ensure that national reform agendas are strongly linked to school and community levels and their good will is secured and reforms envisaged are acceptable.

Recommendation 3

Ministries of education need to develop a long-term, phased plan for truly sector-wide implementation and even beyond the education sector, in order to reap the full benefits of a well-balanced, efficient and productive education sector from early childhood to tertiary level, including non-formal education.

Recommendation 4

Donors should finance longitudinal studies, supporting national processes to establish valid baseline data in order to measure educational progress and the impact of SWAps over time at national, sub-national and school levels. Plans for longitudinal studies should be incorporated in the design phase of SWAps.

Where next for SWAps?

Going forward, given the trajectory of improvement that education SWAps have generally brought about in relation to planning and financing in the sector, an important task for SWAps is to focus more strongly on the highly technical issues of educational quality and teaching and learning. This would mean that SWAps would leave a legacy of the next generation of children being equipped with the appropriate values, knowledge, skills and training to contribute to development in their countries.

References

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This is one of a set of four policy briefs summarising the main findings of a research programme reflecting on and reviewing the global progress of education sector-wide approaches (SWAps) in developing countries since their introduction in the late 1990s. The research analysed the evolution of SWAps and their relationship with (i) aid effectiveness; (ii) planning and financing; (iii) education outcomes; and (iv) fragility. Each policy brief covers one of these themes.

The full report can be accessed at www.cfbt.com

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