



SWAps Summary report

The impact of sector-wide approaches: where from, where now and where to?

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Overview of research

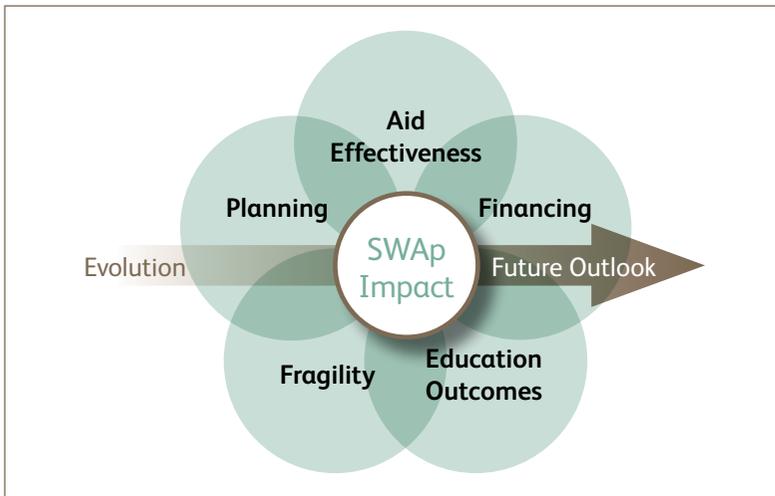
Just over a decade since the introduction of education sector-wide approaches (SWAps), CfBT Education Trust has conducted research to review their global progress since the Ratcliffe and Macrae (1999) publication, commissioned by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, entitled *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 summary version is taken, analyses the evolution of SWAps and their relationship with: (i) aid effectiveness; (ii) planning and financing; (iii) education outcomes; and (iv) fragility.

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The research methodology employed a qualitative approach due to the need to analyse the reasons behind SWAp effectiveness or ineffectiveness. This involved (i) a desk review of existing international and national grey literature on SWAp, aid effectiveness, education planning, education financing, education outcomes in low-income and lower-middle-income countries as well as fragile contexts; and (ii) stakeholder interviews in the form of telephone interviews, written responses to questionnaires or in some cases face-to-face interviews. The informants were made up of experts within the field of SWAp who brought the perspectives from different donors, and independent consultants with national-level experience of implementing SWAp, as well as some non-traditional donors.

The diagram below illustrates the five areas through which SWAp are analysed. It also incorporates the themes of the evolution and future outlook of SWAp since the research sought to understand where they have come from and the direction in which they appear to be heading.

Analytical framework for the research



SWAps: where from?

Education SWAps were introduced in developing countries, beginning in Uganda, in the late 1990s. They sought to increase the overall effectiveness and efficiency of resources and ensure that the education sector was more responsive to national government policies and priorities, facilitating coherence between sector policies and human and financial resource allocations. SWAps grew out of national and international dissatisfaction with project approaches, which were seen to be inefficient and in some cases inappropriate. They also emerged alongside debates regarding aid effectiveness and governance during the 1990s. As a result, there were very high expectations that they would serve as a panacea for the ineffectiveness of existing approaches and poor governance. It is now widely recognised by experts that SWAps have not achieved everything that was hoped of them.

Ratcliffe and Macrae (1999) identified three main components or phases in a SWAp:

1. an agreement between government and donors around the direction of the sector and aid effectiveness;
2. a framework for cooperation around a common agenda for education reform; and
3. a structured operational programme, led and managed by governments and agreed by all parties.

More recently, planning and financing frameworks have been called 'SWAp-like' emphasising the intended 'direction of travel' towards increased alignment rather than listing a set of criteria which verifiably demonstrate that a country has a SWAp. Many countries now refer to using SWAp-like approaches to indicate a commitment to the principles of a SWAp, rather than implementing a full SWAp. Given that different actors and writers interpret the term 'SWAp' differently, the report used the following definition based on the fact that (i) it is referenced in the literature on SWAps; (ii) it is comprehensive; and (iii) nearly all of the informants concurred with it when describing their understanding of a SWAp. A SWAp is where:

'...all significant funding for the sector supports a single sector policy and expenditure programme, under government leadership, adopting common approaches across the sector, and progressing towards relying on government procedures to disburse and account for all funds.' (Brown, Foster, Norton and Naschold, 2001: 7)

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The research found that education SWAps have been implemented in the vast majority of aid-dependent, low-income countries and they have also been adopted in some lower-middle-income countries. Where countries are not particularly dependent on aid, there is less need for a SWAp due to the reduced imperative of harmonisation and alignment of development assistance. Low-income countries which have not adopted SWAps tend to be fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) which may not meet the basic pre-conditions for a SWAp.

Since SWAps first emerged, there has been debate regarding what the approach constitutes. Purists argue that in order to reap the full benefits of a SWAp it needs to cover the whole sector. If there is only a costed plan for a particular sub-sector, it becomes ring-fenced in much the same way as a project. This serves to distort policy and resourcing priorities and the all-important trade-offs and negotiations which should take place within a SWAp. Since the 1990s, there has been an acceptance that a SWAp is unlikely to provide for implementation in all sub-sectors; however the plan should include all sub-sectors. The research revealed that out of the 25 low-income countries which have education SWAps, only five are sub-sector or partial SWAps, focusing only on primary or basic education. This supports the view that sub-sector SWAps are transitional arrangements which set the ground to move towards full SWAps, since many started as partial SWAps.

SWAps: where now?

A clear finding from the research was that SWAps have been inextricably linked to the aid effectiveness and good governance discourse during the 1990s and 2000s (Molenaers and Renard, 2008). Nevertheless, SWAps have not delivered all of the expected dividends of more effective aid. The promise of dramatically improved harmonisation has not been realised. While some countries can testify to improved harmonisation as a result of the SWAp such as Mozambique and Uganda (World Bank, 2001; Penny, Ward, Read and Bines, 2008), there is still an important gap between rhetoric and practice which has served to reduce the impact and efficiency gains that would otherwise have been made through the SWAp. Risk aversion, varying levels of political commitment to SWAps in donor headquarters and broader inter-donor political issues at national and regional levels related to visibility continue to militate against harmonisation. This has resulted in partner governments in certain countries, such as Cambodia and Kenya, still suffering from high transactions costs due to the need to coordinate donors 'outside' the education SWAp (Boak and Brannely, 2009; Woods, 2007). Indeed, the evidence to date points to the fact that transactions costs do not fall but actually increase in the short term (IHSD, 2003). Where they fall slightly for the ministry of education, they increase for the lead donor.

In the longer term, there is mixed evidence regarding whether costs do actually fall. Moreover, the research found that 'non-traditional donors', such as the Hewlett Foundation and Comic Relief as well as 'pragmatic donors' (such as China and India), who are more interested in commercial and trading interests rather than aid effectiveness, have not engaged with SWAPs.

The aid effectiveness principles are invariably not the only forces at work guiding partner governments and donors in their engagement in SWAPs. Both sides are strongly influenced by wider political forces and governance concerns which may represent disincentives for them to move towards harmonisation and alignment (Molenaers and Nijs, 2008). Evidence shows that rules-based institutional reform programmes have been unsuccessful in low-income countries because they have been based on false assumptions. Indeed, the research identified a growing acknowledgement of the need for sensitivity to formal and informal incentives and interests as well as existing patron–client relationships.

With the development of programme-based approaches, promoting harmonisation rather than alignment, more risk-averse donors, such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency or the United States Agency for International Development, have been brought on board to support SWAPs. As a result, there has been a non-linear trajectory towards full alignment under SWAPs. The degree of alignment is highly dependent upon (i) the country's political situation; (ii) the leadership, buy-in and continuity of the minister of education and senior officials; and (iii) the diversity, capacity and commitment of external partners and their in-country representation. The research found that SWAPs are ineffective without strong ownership and leadership by the partner government. The Rwanda SWAP is a positive example of this. Nevertheless, it is necessary to acknowledge the power dynamics at play between the donor(s) as financier and partner government as recipient. Furthermore, certain donor practices can at best undermine, and at worst directly oppose, the principle of ownership in relation to SWAPs, such as in Tanzania (Kuder, 2005).

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Based on the analysis of the relationship between SWApS and aid effectiveness and particularly in light of the evolution towards a 'looser' SWAp concept, the following definition is proposed to reflect the changes in the literature and country experiences since 2001:

A SWAp entails government leadership of a sub-sector plan or a comprehensive, single-sector policy, supported by the majority of significant funding through a variety of modalities, securing consensus from education stakeholders on shared approaches to planning, financing, implementing, regulating, monitoring and reporting, where the lead donor bears the main transactions costs and where accountability moves increasingly downwards to citizens.

SWApS have greatly improved partnerships between partner governments and donors as well as inter-governmental relationships. However, the research showed there have been challenges in fostering genuinely inclusive partnerships in the planning of SWApS, particularly with non-state actors. Meaningful engagement of civil society and the private sector in planning processes is country-specific and has a limited track record. Indeed teacher unions, parent organisations and representatives of indigenous groups are often excluded from policy and technical dialogues. Nevertheless, the role of teachers in the design and implementation of SWApS was found to be vital. In fact, there is evidence that where teachers are not involved, they can be a formidable stumbling block to SWAp implementation.

Through SWApS there has been a change in the accountability structure, where formerly donors had greater power and influence, to a more balanced approach with more equality between them (Steer and Wathne, 2009). Joint sector reviews have emerged as a key component of effective SWApS, providing the opportunity to monitor performance across the sector as well as being the basis for future policy dialogue and decision making. These are now commonplace in countries such as Cambodia, Rwanda and Uganda. While donors expound the importance of common reporting mechanisms, they face pressure from their own parliaments and taxpayers to trace their aid and show its positive results. This illustrates that there is a series of push and pull factors which may weaken the full application of the aid effectiveness principles espoused by a SWAp, especially where the wider governance environment still remains weak.

SWApS have placed an important premium on education planning and their success can mainly be seen in the improved planning capacity, policy development, working ethic, governance and broader institutional development of partner governments. Nevertheless, SWApS do not operate in a vacuum and implementation can be weakened where they are poorly aligned with national government reform programmes such as wider civil service reforms and sector management reviews. The broader working conditions, human resources policies and remuneration levels also serve to reduce the effectiveness of SWApS and the sustainability of their results. The research found that SWApS make higher demands of the leadership, technical, managerial and financial capacity of the partner government, as well as that of in-country donors. As a result, SWApS have entailed a greater focus on long-term approaches to capacity and institutional development. Indeed, the most successful SWApS have introduced a capacity development fund alongside sector budget support, such as in Cambodia and Rwanda.

Early-implemented SWApS in countries such as Ethiopia, Mozambique, Tanzania and Uganda were criticised for their lack of involvement of decentralised government officials (IHSD, 2003; Shepherd and Cabral, 2008). Indeed, the inherent focus on national-level policy, planning and financing has meant that SWApS can have a re-centralising influence. Nevertheless, the research found that more mature SWApS, such as those in Rwanda and Cambodia, have promoted more effective and accountable decentralisation, strengthening the links between the planning and reporting processes at national and sub-national levels. In addition, SWApS have usually been introduced alongside public financial management reform programmes. Unsurprisingly, the success of a SWAp is closely related to the strength of the national public financial management system.

While SWAp proponents assumed that donors would move to provide all their aid through more aligned and harmonised modalities – namely general and sector budget support – the reality has been different. Instead a broad range of aid modalities has supported and continues to support SWApS. However, fragmented approaches are still being employed by some donors. Indeed, ministries of education are likely to continue to prefer a range of modalities with the majority of sectoral aid provided through sector budget support owing to its flexibility in relation to resource control and use.

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Owing to the complexity of designing and implementing SWAps, much focus to date has been on developing institutional capacity and improving national governance. This has distracted both donor and partner government attention from service delivery outcomes and 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. Nevertheless, this focus is increasingly being redressed. Moreover, drawing on experience from Tanzania and Uganda, the research revealed the importance of taking the time to facilitate a nationally defined understanding of and vision for education at the start of the SWAp in relation to the country's broader economic needs and social development.

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 in studies analysing the impact of health SWAps in 11 low-income countries on vaccination rates, antenatal care, infant and child mortality as well as on tuberculosis detection and treatment. In the education sector, there is a lack of longitudinal studies measuring the impact of SWAps and reform programmes on school-level outcomes. This is troubling given that donors are under increasing pressure from their parliaments to demonstrate the tangible results of their aid in quantitative terms.

Despite this, SWAps have been strongly associated with the national expansion of fee-free basic education service delivery and, in some cases, post-basic education. A major success of SWAps has been the fact that donors have been able to support recurrent costs such as teacher salaries, rather than purely one-off projects, thus having a more direct impact on service delivery. Indeed, the more efficient channelling of national and international sector financing has enabled the abolition of school fees in several countries including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda and Uganda, dramatically scaling up the reach of the formal education system. SWAps have also had a positive impact on improving equity in Bangladesh and Nepal.

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. However, there are still challenges related to the collection of sufficiently disaggregated data. Ministry of education officials may perceive equity-related programmes to be a distraction from the ‘real work’ of formal education. 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.

There has not yet been a positive association between governance improvements and indicators of education quality. 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. In spite of this, the research showed that unless there is a changed approach in the design and focus of SWAps, education outcomes, particularly related to learning achievements, are unlikely to improve in the long term.

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As stated earlier, SWApS have mainly been implemented in low- and lower-middle-income countries. The research showed that there are multiple challenges to supporting a SWAp in FCAS, including: (i) the absence of formal and recognised authorities resulting in a legitimacy deficit; (ii) a dearth of capacity and management and financial systems; (iii) high levels of non-state provision; (iv) the non-functional nature of the public financial management system outside the capital and main towns; and (v) the pressure on donors to generate timely results. Furthermore, the forces at work within the political economy are even more pervasive in FCAS than in other low-income countries. The politicisation of all levels of decision making in the education sector presents formidable challenges. There are also implications for the design of SWApS in contexts where there are high levels of political polarisation within and between line ministries responsible for education such as in Zimbabwe. Owing to the pervasive mentality of aid dependence and the skeletal capacity of partner governments in FCAS, there is a strong likelihood that donors will control the objectives and time frames for the SWAp by default. This is compounded by the fact that donors often disagree on approaches and offer contradictory advice to partner governments. The marginal share of public provision and the poor regulation of non-state provision make providing aligned support through country systems problematic. Working through national systems is also challenging in countries where the government is not sovereign in all areas or where it has no representatives or public services.

Despite these challenges, the research found that SWApS are relevant as an approach to planning and financing education in FCAS. The cessation of formal hostilities offers an opportunity to reform the education system and move, perhaps for the first time, towards broad-based planning. Due to the need to make a definitive break with historical patterns of exclusion and discrimination and support the delivery of inclusive education services at scale with the necessary policy and legislative frameworks and regulation, SWApS are an appropriate approach.

Country evidence shows that it is possible to embark on SWAp-like approaches in FCAS. Even in more unstable FCAS, 'low-level' approaches can be adopted such as developing mechanisms for engaging with local administrations and coordinating and sharing data collected by NGOs and donors. Following the development of Sierra Leone's sector-wide Education Sector Plan four years after the end of the conflict, an Education Sector Support Fund was eventually established to improve sector dialogue between the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and donors and to strengthen steps towards a SWAp (Boak, 2010).

SWAps are relevant in FCAS due to the need to improve the availability and quality of education service delivery at scale in order to meet citizens' expectations, thus increasing confidence in the government. Given the plethora of actors involved in the provision of services in FCAS, the development of nationally applicable and widely accepted regulatory and accountability frameworks through a SWAp provides a basis for increasing the visibility and legitimacy of the state, both in the eyes of non-state providers and community members and children. Identifying a sustainable way of financing teachers' salaries (often strongly supported by community financing) is generally a priority in FCAS given teachers' pivotal role in providing quality and protective education. Securing consensus across a broad range of stakeholders with diverse interests around a new, inclusive and appropriate curriculum which fosters social cohesion and develops relevant knowledge and skills is also a priority. Designed well, a SWAp provides a real opportunity to address these issues. In addition, in light of the numerous donor agencies and NGOs supporting education in FCAS, SWAps are extremely relevant as a principle for organising and scaling up bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Indeed, the early SWAp in Nepal demonstrated the feasibility of donor harmonisation within a context of heavy aid dependence.

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Donors increasingly seek to link their sector-specific support in FCAS to broader state-building and peace-building initiatives. Country experience from Rwanda shows that where there is sufficient stability and will, SWAps can be an effective way of building the legitimacy and capacity of the state while also strengthening accountability. This is due to the fact that by their very nature, SWAps ensure a strong partnership between donors and partner governments and, when designed well, result in: (i) the strengthening of national systems and capacity, including regulation; (ii) improved governance, accountability and monitoring by civil society; (iii) enhanced inter- and intra-ministerial working relationships; and (iv) greater efficiency in the allocation and channelling of national and international resources. These are necessary, although not sufficient conditions for broader state-building. Citizens often have high expectations of state delivery of public services, the fulfilment of which can determine short- and long-term stability. The research found that where SWAps improve the availability and quality of service delivery, this increases citizens' confidence in the government and improves perceptions of the government as a service provider. Indeed, the state's ability to meet these expectations is vital to its own credibility and legitimacy. As a result, in this regard, donors can play a key role in shaping the future legitimacy of the state through effective support for a well designed SWAp.

Centre-periphery relations are particularly important in FCAS given that sub-national authorities may have secessionist roots or aspirations. Decentralised units may have more perceived legitimacy. While state-building has traditionally focused on the centralisation of the state, evidence from the health sector reveals that state-society relations improve more rapidly at sub-national levels where there is robust national-level support for decentralisation. As a result, the management of centre-periphery relations has the potential to either enhance or undermine state-building objectives.

SWAps: where to?

Given the current geographical distribution of SWAps, it is likely that they will continue current trends and spread to additional lower-middle-income countries since a considerable number of these countries benefit from donor support.

Based on the analysis in the research, it is possible that mature SWAps in countries with more developed governance might go 'up a level' to become social SWAps incorporating the main social sector ministries such as education, health, social welfare, women, etc. This would allow much more meaningful and holistic policy dialogue across all the pro-poor sectors and enable a greater potential for cross-sectoral working and linkages. However, this would also require much more complex planning and coordination among a larger and more diverse group of ministries and other stakeholders with differing priorities, clients and incentives. In addition to moving 'upwards', the literature shows that mature SWAps will also increasingly focus on embedding good practice in relation to coordination, planning, implementing, monitoring and reporting at sub-national levels.

In light of the disappointing impact to date on education quality, it is likely that this will be an increasing priority for SWAps. This will involve more policy dialogue on education technical issues including the curriculum, assessing learning achievements, teacher management, teacher education and training and the role of school management committees and the broader community.

Key finding 1

Mature SWAps in stable low-income countries have had a strong impact on institutional development and new ways of working have been established within ministries of education. Nevertheless, SWAp effectiveness has at times been constrained due to the broader political economy.

Recommendation 1.1

In light of the fact that a variety of financing modalities can be used to support a SWAp, donors should seek to be inclusive in their partnerships with one another rather than forming exclusive alliances to the detriment of the long-term institutional development of the ministry of education.

Recommendation 1.2

Partner governments and donors need to ensure that the design and implementation of a SWAp draws on comprehensive political economy analysis and is sensitive to existing formal and informal incentive structures and interests.

Key finding 2

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 improving the quality of education.

Recommendation 2.1

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 2.2

Ministries of education need to involve key agents of change within the teaching and learning process in the SWAp preparation and 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 2.3

Ministries of education need to develop a long-term, phased plan for truly sector-wide implementation 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 2.4

Donors should finance longitudinal studies, supporting national systems 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.

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Key finding 3

SWAps are relevant in FCAS and implementing well-designed SWAps contributes positively to state-building.

Recommendation 3.1

Donors need to conduct political economy and conflict analyses in FCAS prior to designing SWAp-like approaches in order to ensure they address the underlying causes of conflict and are sensitive to the context of fragility particularly in relation to support to decentralisation.

Recommendation 3.2

Where political stability, government will and capacity allow, donors should support the preparation of SWAp-like approaches as early as possible in FCAS including targeted approaches to areas which have historically been denied access to education.

Recommendation 3.3

Donors need to work to strengthen the state's regulatory capacity through a SWAp within the context of improving the short route of accountability while identifying mechanisms to support the long route of accountability.

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There is also 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 (SWAs) in developing countries since their introduction in the late 1990s. The research analysed the evolution of SWAs 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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