DEVPOLICYBLOG

Making education work for those who need it

By Sheldon Shaeffer
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Many readers will have had a similar experience to mine when working on education projects – visits to schools with textbooks and science equipment still in boxes, libraries and computer laboratories locked, materials gathering dust, student work from years past hanging on classroom walls, and students sitting in groups with the teacher standing firmly at the front of the room. Unfortunately, this is often evidence that reforms designed at the top of the system, and good practices implemented at the bottom, were never really sustained.

It has never been easy to ensure that reforms at national level continue to be promoted and that good practices in the classroom are taken to scale after external funding and technical assistance are withdrawn. This is a challenge faced by every development initiative. So what can be done to ensure greater sustainability of reforms and improved classroom practices?

1. Grounding education in local realities and institutions
Reforms should be firmly grounded in local institutional cultures, managed within existing structures of the Ministry or Department of Education and designed in response to their needs.

Frequently, projects advocate reforms that are borrowed or adapted from other countries or reflect global aid priorities, rather than being responsive to local needs and realities. Often, these projects are managed by units outside of, and relatively independent from, existing governmental structures and procedures.

To the aid agency, this can be more efficient and guarantees more control and may speed up implementation. However, it may be at the expense of local "ownership". For reform to be sustainable, both institutional support and the commitment of individual decision-makers are required.

Taking more time at the design stage to understand the cultural and bureaucratic context of the proposed reform and embedding the management, refinement, and assessment of the project within the Ministry are absolutely essential to sustainability. This may result in a short-term reduction in efficiency, but will increase the chances of sustained positive impact.

2. Giving a project an adequate lifespan
The sustainability of education projects is enhanced by a lifespan that allows for a deeper and more permanent impact on the system.

Most projects are too short to achieve meaningful impact and run the risk of not being institutionalised in the Ministry or internalised by the individuals tasked with ensuring its success.

There are many reasons for this:

- A mistaken belief that changes in physical resources and brief in-service training can change long-held values and practices;
- Aid agency fatigue and desire to move on to something new;
- Changing priorities and the rotation of responsible staff in the aid agency and/or the receiving Ministry of Education; and
- Greater need for sustainability and a commitment from aid agencies and ministries to longer term political, technical, and financial support for reform intended to enhance the quality of classroom practice.

3. Greater simplicity of project design
The objectives, components, and complexity of projects must take into account the feasibility of scale-up.

The more resources and components that are added to a project (e.g., materials, equipment, in-service and pre-service training, infrastructure, school governance) the more likely it is

that replication and scale up without extra resources will fail. This is a lesson that is seemingly never learned.

So it's essential that project scale-ups identify the core components that have most potential for enduring impact and ensure that these components can be implemented in every school included in the expansion. Failure to do so undermines the whole reform process.

4. Establishing a rigorous Monitoring & Evaluation Framework

M&E is essential for all development projects and provides the foundation for evidence-based decision-making and sustained positive impact.

Without a robust M&E approach from start to finish, it is hugely difficult to assess progress, identify changes, and make refinements during a project's life span. An M&E framework, including clear indicators and baseline data, is the bedrock of evidence-based reform and essential in providing credibility to education innovations.

5. Sustained school-level support

The introduction of change in pedagogy or materials alone does not lead to long-term change. Ongoing support to schools and local government is essential for embedding new behaviours.

Even if teachers are trained extensively in new content and methods, the transfer of this capacity to a "real" school context presents practical challenges. Change can be undermined by other teachers, principals, local education supervisors and even parents who may not be knowledgeable or supportive of new methods.

Clearly, the delivery of new education methods is no easy task. Schools require sustained follow-up support, mentoring, and advice. Identifying appropriate advocates and empowering them to support reform are essential elements of sustainability.

6. Decentralising school administration

Sustainability can be enhanced by genuine decentralisation.

Decentralisation brings meaningful authority (and resources) to the level where change matters the most and encourages local innovations and the adaptation of centrally designed reforms. However, decentralisation often does not go far enough. It is not adequately planned, resourced, or supported with training that addresses the dual challenges of empowering those at the bottom and training those at the top to surrender total control.

Decentralisation processes must not only transfer burdens of administration and funding to lower levels of the system, they should also promote the development of locally-based or adapted innovations that have a better chance of being sustained.

7. A shared understanding of accountabilities

Education systems are complex and naturally tend to maintain their systems of hierarchy and accountability.

The school, and most importantly its teachers, is in reality the stakeholder with ultimate accountability. However, sustaining a teacher's motivation and capacity is often impeded by a number of challenges:

- low status and pay;
- an unsympathetic principal and fellow teachers;
- an indifferent community; and/or
- local office inspectors more concerned with administrative regulations than with teacher development.

Local education offices should be the key agent for supporting teachers and sustaining change. If these offices are weak, politically influenced, and poorly resourced, they will neither feel accountable, nor have the means to be accountable, for the sustainability of progressive reform.

Stakeholders at each level of education need to have a clear sense of responsibility and accountability for improving the quality of education. This is especially true at the local level – the education office, community and school. Only through 'owning' their accountability, can stakeholders fully commit to the challenge of reform.

8. Internalising the "soul" of reform

The Indonesian language has a very good term for "internalisation" based on the word *jiwa,* or soul. Something – such as the spirit of a reform or a value underlying child-centred pedagogy – is said to be "soul-ed" (*dijiwai*) if it is genuinely understood, accepted, and internalised. Only when this has been achieved – perhaps through some of the suggestions above – is it really possible to say that true sustainability has been achieved.

The soul and spirit of reform must be nurtured at all levels of the system – from classroom teacher to the highest levels in the Ministry and local government – to ensure that good practices become the norm and not just a passing phase.

Sheldon Shaeffer is an Early Childhood Education Specialist with Palladium. He was previously Director of UNESCO's Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education in Bangkok for over seven years. This post is republished with permission from [InDevelopment](#), Palladium's blog.

About the author/s

Sheldon Shaeffer

Sheldon Shaeffer was Director of UNESCO's Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education in Bangkok for over seven years. He worked previously as a research fellow at the International Institute for Education Planning (UNESCO) and as Chief of the Education Section of UNICEF in New York. His professional focus for over 30 years has been on education systems and reforms in Southeast Asia, including in Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Timor Leste, and Myanmar. Sheldon is currently an Early Childhood Education Specialist with Palladium.

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