

Issues and challenges raised by development agencies in implementing the new modalities of aid to education

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Abstract Over the past decade there has been increasing concern with aid effectiveness, and, more generally, development effectiveness. New ways of delivering aid have been developed, including sector-wide approaches and direct budget support. This paper reports on the progress that has been made through some of these new modalities of aid to education, as perceived by some of the senior staff of a handful of the major development agencies. Where have these developments led us in the education sectors of many developing countries? What are the prospects for the ways in which aid is planned and delivered and in the relationships between donors and recipient governments? What are the main issues and challenges currently being raised and addressed? How have these changes affected the impact of the aid provided? These are some of the questions that are raised in this study, with answers provided by the agencies themselves.

Keywords Development · Aid effectiveness · Sector-wide approach

Over the past decade there has been increasing concern with aid effectiveness, and, more generally, development effectiveness. As the calls for increased aid continue to be made, the amounts disbursed have been less than demanded—and required—and the results have been poorer than anticipated in terms of poverty reduction in general, and the growth and development of access to a quality education for all. Regarding the latter, some countries have made more progress than others, but as has been shown in repeated Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Reports, many countries remain “off-track” in achieving either the relevant Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) or the EFA targets. In light of often disappointing progress, new ways of delivering aid have been developed, including sector-wide approaches and direct budget support, the aim being to make the aid given more effective. This paper reports on the progress that has been made through some of these new

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modalities of aid to education, as perceived by some of the senior staff of a handful of the major development agencies.¹

The first section of the paper provides an introductory background to the new aid modalities while Section 2 focuses on the impact for education and on some of the evaluations which have been carried out. Section 3 discusses the key issues and challenges as seen from a review of the literature and in light of recent experience in implementing or working toward the implementation of the new aid modalities. Section 4 provides some concluding remarks.

Background to the new aid modalities

While much experimentation with new ways of assisting educational development had begun by the late 1990s, with bilateral and multilateral agencies participating in sector-wide approaches (SWAp) and, eventually, direct budget support in aid of education, the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, Paris (2005), signed by 107 countries and 26 international organizations in 2005, generalized what had been the commitments of a much smaller group of so-called “like-minded” agencies.² The Paris Declaration introduced indicators of progress, with targets, for good practice for its five key tenets of aid effectiveness: ownership, harmonization, alignment, results, and mutual accountability. Furthermore, instead of monitoring only the aid-recipient countries, the practices of the development agencies were also monitored in terms of honouring the commitments made in Paris.³

Many factors have been behind the push toward greater aid effectiveness and the form it has taken. One was the acknowledgement of the known inefficiencies and high transaction costs to aid-recipient countries of development agencies “going it alone”, designing their own individual projects, and carrying out their individual monitoring missions and reviews of their own aid interventions, each of which demands the time and attention of recipient country ministry officials. A second factor was the recognition that decades of activities to promote “capacity building” have not resulted in the sustained institutional development necessary for managing the planning and implementation of development projects by capable government ministries. A further important factor, following the Dollar Report (World Bank 1998), was the selection by donors of countries with “good policy environments” to ensure the greatest effectiveness of financial aid and an increased emphasis on the adoption of the “right” policies. The result was an increased attention to “policy dialogue”. These factors remain important, but they have been coloured by the experiences of development agencies and aid-recipient countries over the past few years, as well as by the increased security concerns and the focus on so-called “fragile states”, specifically those countries, which, for a variety of reasons, are least likely to have “favourable policy environments”. At the same time as many of the bilateral and multilateral aid agencies have been developing new, more effective, forms of aid they have been undergoing their own restructuring and reform, with several attempting to decentralize the locus of decision-making to their country offices and training their staff in the new aid modalities.

¹ See (Riddell 2007) for a more comprehensive report on the policies, documentation and evaluations of aid to education by the donor agencies of France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the World Bank, the European Union, and the United States.

² Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

³ See <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/57/60/36080258.pdf>.

Focusing down from these lofty heights of “general aid policy” to the education sector, a further factor has influenced the development of the new aid modalities: that of the desire for overall sectoral coherence. Following decades of focusing on specific sub-sectors, discussions on support from donors to the education sector increasingly encompass the whole sector in one plan and consider all education expenditure—domestic and aided—in one consolidated, medium-term framework.

How have these developments affected the education sectors of developing countries? What are the prospects for the ways in which aid is planned and delivered and in the relationships between donors and recipient governments? What are the main issues and challenges currently being raised and addressed? How have these changes affected the impact of the aid provided? These are some of the questions that are raised in this study, with answers provided by the agencies themselves.

First, some nomenclature is in order. Two aspects of the new forms of aid modality are examined in this study: sector-wide approaches (SWAp) and direct budget support (DBS)—whether sectoral (SBS), focused on the education sector, or general (GBS), in which the education sector features as a major strategic priority. A SWAp attempts to harmonize external and domestic resources in support of an education sector strategic plan. Budget support is a financing modality. Sectoral budget support may be used in a SWAp alongside other financial modalities.⁴

The key components of an effective SWAp are:

- A clear nationally owned sector policy and strategy;
- A medium-term expenditure programme that reflects the sector strategy;
- Systematic arrangements for programming the resources that support the sector;
- A performance monitoring system that measures progress and strengthens accountability;
- Broad consultation mechanisms that involve all significant stakeholders;
- A formalized government-led process for aid co-ordination and dialogue at the sector level;
- An agreed process for moving towards harmonized systems for reporting, budgeting, financial management and procurement (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2005)).

As can be seen from these components, much more is expected of the recipient country than in a ring-fenced project in which specific staff may be hired to deliver project-specific goals, and the project’s performance can occur relatively remotely from the workings of the country’s main administrative and management systems. The priorities delineated in projects need not necessarily reflect the country’s own plans. The vision of a SWAp, even if its pure form is not realized, comprises an ideal-typical form of governance, which is meant to be supported by external development partners. To the extent, however, that a SWAp is a donor’s “fix” and does not involve the recipient country’s vision of the way things ought to be, then it remains an imposition, even if fewer conditionalities are linked to financial disbursements, or the capacities intended to be developed are not controversial in nature, and good things in themselves. This is what makes it difficult to criticize a SWAp—many of the stages along the way are worthwhile: improved public financial management; diversified consultation and stakeholder participation; an enhanced orientation of management for results; evidence-based policies, strategies and results; and a

⁴ It is also the case that more sub-sectoral education SWAps are in existence than those covering the whole sector.

reduction in parallel systems of reporting, budgeting, financial management and procurement.

Budget support, whether sectoral or general, is essentially a financing modality and so can be used in support of SWAps, at the sectoral level, or poverty reduction or national development plans more generally. Both forms of budget support consist of the provision of on-budget, typically fungible, aid provided to the government's treasury and mingled with domestic resources. In the case of sectoral budget support it would be expected that the funds are earmarked at least for the sector, whereas in general budget support they are not. In practice, even if aid flows are not earmarked, it is assumed that the strategic priorities set out in a poverty reduction or national development plan will be favoured. The assessments typically made by development agencies for entering into budget support require that many of the components of either a sector programme or of broader governance reform are in place. Some development agencies have tried to "jump the gun" in providing budget support, ahead of SWAps, on the argument that the coherence across the various social and economic sectors should ultimately be supported, rather than the prioritization of only a single sector, especially in the face of multiple financial requirements for poverty alleviation and economic growth.

Impact of the new modalities of aid to education

Two levels of impact can be anticipated from the more extensive use of SWAps and budget support in the education sector: the goals of the sector strategies themselves, and the intermediary processes envisaged as being necessary to reach those goals, such as planning, management, resource allocation, disbursement, implementation and accounting. What has been the impact?

Some staff dealing with education SWAps and GBS at donor agency headquarters contend that they are "beginning to deliver", for example through the growth in access, the improved morale resulting from the flow of money directly into schools for learning materials, and the ability of governments to pay teachers' salaries and thus expand their systems. The problem of raising the quality of education, however, loomed large in their comments on impact, in that despite government and donor efforts, there was no observable decline in high dropout and repetition rates, for instance. A general contention was that, in these areas, what is needed is a continued focus on process and not merely on impact. Other impacts perceived included the greater coherence of donor support to education through, for instance, the Memoranda of Understanding governing pooled funding. In addition, staff pointed to the greater cohesion and increased ownership surrounding Ministry of Education goals, and improvements in audits of fund flow and implementation capacity. Noticeable too was greater country ownership, compared to earlier projects. The overall impression from donors' remarks is one of optimism, but still with a long road ahead to achieve not only sustainable education systems but also the national sectoral goals. A common view was that while access was often improving, educational quality was either little affected or, in those cases of very rapid expansion, even deteriorating.

The Dutch evaluation of SWAps well expressed the current conundrum:

Larger flows of aid are good for achieving quantified results, which are relatively easy to measure at the level of output and outcome. When measuring impact, however, it is the quality of the interventions that is important, i.e. institutional

development, capacity building and regulation, factors which cannot be improved through funding alone (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Policy and Operations Evaluation Department 2006, Netherlands, p. 8).

A less optimistic view of what can be achieved through the new aid modalities is given in a study comparing donor-led and recipient-led approaches:

Any attempt at measuring the impact of the H&A (harmonisation and alignment) agenda since its inception a decade ago is likely to run into a number of problems. While its final objective is clearly linked to development outcomes, much of its focus is on changing approaches and behaviours that may bring about results only over a much longer time horizon. It can be argued that the policy shifts advocated by the “partnership” model of development cooperation, while based on a clear perception of the problems they want to address, constitute an “act of faith” when compared to the scant evidence on their actual impact (de Renzio and Mulley 2006, p. 8).

USAID evaluated the impact of GBS in five countries in 2003/4 (United States Agency for International Development (USAID) 2005) and concluded that in general it had had a positive impact. There was greater recipient-country ownership, in most cases donor coordination and harmonization had improved, and the changes in aid management relationships had affected relationships in non-DBS activities. Improved service delivery followed from the increased flow of funds and there was evidence that policy dialogue had influenced policies and processes. Some adverse effects were increased transaction costs and less predictable funding resulting from the need to reach the programme conditionalities. “Poverty impacts could not be identified, mainly due to the inability to distinguish PGBS (partnership GBS) effects from impacts of other variables at this level or the fact that PGBS was too recent to have had an influence.”

Finally, the most rigorous evaluation of GBS that has been carried out to date concluded that:

The most obvious effects of PGBS (Partnership GBS) on service delivery have been through increased expenditure and expanded services, most notably for basic education and health. This was largely a response to strong, and popular, demand for services. Quantitative improvements (access for more poor people) are easier to achieve than qualitative improvements, and the expansion of basic services has often been accompanied by a deterioration in quality. Other PGBS effects (through policies and, especially, through institutional changes) are likely to take longer in any case. Where there are beginnings of such change (e.g. via improved allocative and operational efficiency of public finance management) they are not yet embedded, but such effects, allied to mechanisms linking PGBS to dialogue and performance targets (and enhanced coherence and coordination across sectors), have considerable potential to address issues of quality and access (International Development Department (IDD) et al. 2006, p. 68).

What seems to be emerging from both individual professionals and research evaluations is cautious optimism, but the jury is still out on impact; many implementation problems continue to be difficult to resolve speedily; and more attention to process may be required—and a wider berth therefore given to different types of impact indicators. The quality of the educational reforms funded through SWAs and GBS remains the challenge.

The issues and challenges

Many issues were raised by staff in the set of development agencies covered in this study, concerning the challenges faced in implementing the new modalities of aid to education as part of their overall efforts at improving aid and development effectiveness.

Capacity development and implementation constraints on the effectiveness of the new aid modalities

What is clear from the particular set of views of staff in the development agencies included in this study is that there is general concern with programme implementation and the quality of the educational reforms being supported. While, especially with general budget support, the attention of staff has been directed at cross-sectoral institutional development, including improving public financial management, planning, resource allocation prioritization and decision making, the educationists in the agencies nonetheless reflect a certain frustration at not being able to influence programme implementation as they used to in the project approach.

In some respects it would seem as though we have come full circle from a focus on “capacity building” in the days of project aid to a recognition that even with the increased flow of funds and increased ownership of recipient governments through SWAps and DBS, that capacity development is not achieved overnight and that “throwing money at education” (Hanushek 1981) will not provide the qualitative improvements necessary for sustained educational reform. The professional, educational and financial management interfaces of implementation all require attention.

Officials in all of the development agencies included in this study recognized that their own staff numbers and capacities were part of this overall concern. It was accepted that a trade-off exists between having dedicated educationists in-country as opposed to generalists, hybrids or economists who are able only to follow the cross-sectoral rather than education-sector-specific developments. The issue has been expressed as one of donor staff not being able, on a regular basis, to follow the technical, as opposed to the general, dialogue to the extent they would like and, in some cases, not being able to participate professionally in education-specific policy discussions.

However, another way of looking at this issue is to ask why agency professionals should be participating in such discussions? It could be argued that if recipient governments want professional guidance they should be the ones to ask for it and determine the terms of reference on which it is provided. Such a debate underlines the still nascent changes required in the provision of technical assistance, notwithstanding the Paris Declaration’s commitment to coordinated support for capacity development.

Related to this conundrum are two further questions: (1) what is an “acceptable” educational policy and strategy? And (2) what are “sufficient” implementation capacities? If the move to the new aid modalities is intended to increase ownership as well as institutional development, how should the policy advice of the development agency be handled: as coming from an equal “partner”, or with an understanding by the recipient country that funding is likely to depend on particular policy predilections of the development agency? With respect to the second question, the *ex post*, as opposed to the *ex ante*, reviews of the recipient country’s system are likely to lessen the impression that capacity development is a hurdle as opposed to a necessary means for achieving the mutually accepted goals of educational development. As with all of the various aspects of the new aid modalities, trust must underlie such relationships. More generally, there has been

insufficient examination of the full range of the modalities of capacity development, and not merely of their coordination. For instance, the continued use of scholarships and fellowships is a major means of capacity development. How does this fit with institutional as opposed to individual development? How many qualified country nationals are working for in-country offices of international development agencies?

A further related issue is the common “pseudo-ownership” of policies and plans, whether written by consultants or nationals and then endorsed with token participation by a wider stakeholder constituency, and signed by those in power. This is not just a matter of representation but also of voice, in terms of the selection and inclusion of policies relevant to minority stakeholder groups and of ensuring that policies are tailored to the needs of the poor, for instance, and of securing capacity development appropriate to decentralized levels. Lavergne and Wood point to “the sense that one gets from the Paris Declaration ... that local ownership is defined by the existence of a single national development strategy owned by the central government, and that this is the only legitimate expression of country needs” (Lavergne and Wood 2006, p. 19).

A recent review of absorptive capacity in the education sector, which includes an attempt to bring educationists and economists to some common ground, well illustrates the difficulty of making effective use of aid through SWAps and DBS due to implementation constraints (Rose 2006). Where the economists interviewed focus on the macro-economic constraints to using increased funds for education, educationists focus on the implementation constraints, be they a lack of capacity in public financial management, performance evaluation, or indeed teacher education. Without a common understanding, for instance, of “quality education”, economists will continue to use proxy indicators that may show some improved results, but not those that adequately address the continuing concerns of educationists.

“Best practices” versus contextualized approaches vis à vis alignment

Assimilating successful approaches and appropriately contextualizing them for use in new environments is difficult at the best of times. It makes for strained relationships when those putting forward the “best practices” have the upper hand. There is clearly a conflict between donors aligning themselves with national policies and programmes on the one hand, while offering policy advice based on “best practices” from other countries on the other. It is especially conflict-ridden if the policy dialogue is exclusive to those in political power. There are many perspectives on this issue. One has already been raised in the section above concerning, very simply, the different understanding of educational quality by economists and educationists and, by implication, the indicators chosen to measure quality. It is understood, for instance, that input indicators, such as teacher–pupil ratios, numbers of textbooks per pupil, numbers of trained teachers, have been used far more than outcome indicators, such as learning achievement or other expected outcomes of the education system. One of the reasons is that the latter are harder or more costly to measure and/or that sufficient capacity to do so may not exist within the country. The recently completed evaluation of World Bank primary education projects refers to “the lack of an adequate evidence base informing efforts to raise learning outcomes. Many countries still do not generate the information they need to design solutions to improving low learning outcomes among the disadvantaged, and there has not been adequate experimentation with local solutions and their evaluation with respect to their impact on learning outcomes” (World Bank 2006, p. xv). From one perspective this sounds fine; indeed, one of the lessons emerging from the evaluation is: “More, better, and more contextualized analytical work is needed on learning outcomes and their determinants at the primary level” (World

Bank 2006, p. xvi). However, whose agenda and whose research designs are likely to be funded to improve such a knowledge base? Is there not often, in fact, a great deal of local knowledge which, since it is not validated by external frames of reference and techniques, is not recognized? Are the political and socio-economic “determinants of achievement” such as teachers on less than living wages and sexual abuse in the classroom, included in the research frame and not merely the educational interfaces? One of the questions raised by development agency educationists interviewed was how do development agencies respond when indigenous solutions—solutions that differ from ‘best practice’ or the particular flavour of the month focus—are put forward in policy discussions concerning the funding of the education sector?

Projects have been criticized for imposing donor priorities and thus contributing to the incoherence of sector-wide education development planning. Within SWAps, earmarked support for a particular sub-sector can serve the same purpose. Where is alignment? Similarly, the FTI’s benchmarks, used in its indicative framework for assessing countries’ education strategic plans, impose “best practice” guidelines, including the hotly debated percentage of 2.8–3.6% GDP for domestically resourced recurrent expenditure (predominantly teachers’ salaries) and the subsequent incentive to employ para-teachers with lower salary costs. Yet, if we consider the lack of impact of the new aid modalities on educational quality, surely salary disincentives play a major role. Without doubt there are potential conflicts between “best practices” advocated by donors and alignment with “national” policies.

Performance assessment and ownership

Performance assessment plays many roles in the new modalities of aid to education. In addition to ex ante situation analyses for the purpose of constructing baselines from which to measure and monitor performance, ex post analyses of impact, primarily for donor constituencies, have always clouded the performance assessment required of any national education system. Mutual accountability is the new mantra: performance assessment should satisfy donors’ requirements while at the same time serving primarily national purposes. The unequal partnerships in which money rides on the adoption of donor-compliant systems, however, often makes for compacts which not only load a system with indicators unlikely to have been chosen by governments, but which also contribute to undermining national ownership of the process of performance assessment. In countries in which the quality of data is poor and funding is available to upgrade it, making independent judgements about the type of system to be put in place is fraught with the danger of alienating the funding partner and possibly losing the ability to allocate contracts. How many educational management information systems have been redesigned and re-funded over the past three decades because they have been initially inadequate for national purposes? As one donor official put it, “We’re so concerned with the ‘hows’ that we’ve lost sight of the ‘whats’.” Add to this what are often unrealistic targets superimposed for political reasons—whether from the donor or the recipient government side—and it is no wonder that the accountability for performance can often break down between the government city and the most rural schools.

“Country” or “Government” led policies: accountability relationships

What underlies this issue is the question asked by one of the donor staff interviewed, “Is a bottom-up, sector-wide approach possible?” This is a highly contentious issue, whose colouring has changed somewhat as increasing experience has been gained with the new

aid modalities. When SWApS were first being constructed, although those involved were often aware of the need for wider participation in the joint assessments and further reviews of sector performance, once a deal had been struck between the ministry of education and the donor partners the emphasis was on coordination, which clearly implied government-led coordination. This entailed a change from the project approach and was often a tall order in many countries. As this change occurred, attention shifted partly to whether there was more than token participation in policy dialogue and reviews. In some countries, concerns were expressed that bodies had been established parallel to representative government organs, such as Parliament, thus undermining normal, democratic accountability. Further questions have been raised about the inclusion in SWApS of NGOs, not only as major representative stakeholders, but also as educational service providers. In some countries, government has competed with NGO providers, not accepting their provision of educational services as being eligible for SWAp funding, for instance.

Political analysis, political influence and policies

It is clear that aid, not least aid to education, is not provided without political considerations coming into play. As long as aid is not given only on the basis of need, but is coloured by historical relationships and strategic interests, those countries requiring the most assistance are unlikely to receive it, even if they make good cases such as through the EFA Fast Track Initiative. (Total ODA to the poorest 65 countries comprised only 43% of total aid in 2003/4: Riddell 2007.) Different donor countries divide aid differently between meeting their foreign policy and their development goals. Some, such as the Netherlands, limit the numbers of countries where they engage in development cooperation and the sectors in which they work and some recipient countries limit the numbers of agencies with whom they enter into development cooperation agreements. The point, however, is that these decisions are by no means apolitical and, despite policies which specify the criteria for selection of partner countries, these decisions are not always transparent. At the extreme, in a country in which a group of donors may want to pursue the new aid modalities, but where a large donor underwrites large portions of the government budget for strategic reasons, the agreements reached in such settings are unlikely to be ideal.

Some of the factors constraining the implementation of educational reform policies and the resulting lack of impact on the quality of education have already been discussed. Political influences within the recipient country also come into play. An increase in the number of children in classrooms, irrespective of what they are learning, is much easier to sell politically within donor countries than the more tendentious, “improved learning outcomes”, which often contribute only indirectly to improved livelihoods. Thus, schools are built, textbooks may be delivered, but some of the implementation problems that are harder to solve, such as improving classroom practices, are simply not as visible and may not have the same level of support—at least from the politicians. This is the flip side of the positive policy influence of donor agencies, which can leverage in favour of the poor whose voices may not be heard and for whom a poor quality education is simply not worth the sacrifice.

Sequential versus coexisting, hybrid aid instruments

The realism that has emerged among the development agencies from the experience of implementing the new aid modalities has in general led to a greater acceptance of hybrid or coexisting aid modalities, for reasons of risk aversion as well as for participation and influence in the sectoral and technical policy discussions. Although budget support buys a

place at the policy table, for those agencies wishing to be more hands-on in education sector policy making, the high table of cross-sectoral resource allocation decision making may be inadequate. In practice, development agencies have never been purist about the new aid modalities; what has changed, somewhat, is the greater acceptance by donors of the view that SWApS should no longer be seen merely as a stepping stone on the way to providing aid in the form of general budget support. This is due in part to the experience of some SWApS which, though having provided overall sectoral coherence, have nonetheless been composed largely of large projects, with separate funds deployed in parallel with domestic resources. Their use may be analogous to the positive use of projects, piloted across a sector, which may eventually be scaled up. An example could be public financial management reforms, included in an education SWAp with an anticipation of broader application.

One of the related problems raised by staff in the development agencies was how to make use of the lessons learned from sectoral experiences and apply them to general budget support, especially given the greater acceptance of hybrid programmes as well as the typical staffing of their in-country offices. Tranche release performance indicator assessment, for instance, covering general and sector-specific performance targets, requires both economic and education sector knowledge and experience. Setting aside the issue of development agency staff competencies and whatever professional development is offered to upgrade them, why should development agencies be so concerned with the active participation of their staff in programme development if the objective of the new aid modalities is to align donor support with national policies? The reason has everything to do with the concept of “ownership”. The Bretton Woods institutions are perhaps more up-front than some of the bilateral agencies in explaining its meaning for them:

Predominantly for the IMF and (though to a lesser extent) the World Bank, ownership is understood as the process whereby recipient countries come round to accepting and “owning” the respective financial institution’s programmes, policies and approaches to development, growth and poverty reduction (Boughton 2003, p. 4, quoted in Wood 2004, p. 34). Likewise for the Bank, ownership is a concept that “denotes a high probability that the policy and institutional changes associated with a lending operation will be adopted and implemented even if there is internal opposition” (World Bank 2001, p. 73).

Carrying out the donor-government policy dialogue may not make a difference to quality, not least because of the questionable, underlying ownership: the tautology that we’re getting it right when the policy documents accord with our wishes.

Guidelines, harmonization, ownership and comparative advantages

Five years have passed since a survey was conducted of the approaches and policies of the major bilateral and multilateral development agencies toward the new aid modalities (Riddell 2002). Whereas agencies were, at that time, only beginning to write guidelines of best practice for their agencies’ contributions toward SWApS and DBS, and to work out the operational modalities, today most agencies have produced guidelines for their staff and some have even included recipient country stakeholders in some of their professional development workshops and seminars. Indeed, there is now considerable material for orientation and training in the new aid modalities, though the bulk of it has been tailored for development agency staff.

In addition, there are very many groups promoting the new forms of aid effectiveness in one way or another, from the long-standing group of “like-minded agencies” to the Learning

Network on Programme-Based Approaches (LENPA), the DAC Working Party on Aid Effectiveness, and to the UN reform, “Delivering as One”, which aims to bring more coherence to the range of UN organizations and their operations, especially in-country (United Nations 2006). The EC has introduced a “Common Framework for Drafting Country Strategy Papers” (Commission of the European Communities 2006) “on which to model all Community CSPs”. UNESCO has drafted an EFA Global Action Plan to harmonize the UN convening agencies of the Dakar Forum (World Education Forum 2000) in their global and in-country support for EFA, “building on each agency’s comparative advantage and harmonising actions in support of country-led national education sector plans to achieve the EFA goals by 2015” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2006). The Strategic Partnership for Africa (Strategic Partnership with Africa (SPA) 2007) supports aid alignment, especially of the new aid modalities, for aid effectiveness.

Despite all this activity towards harmonization, including guidelines, best practice notes, operational manuals, training, and even silent partnerships, in which one agency delegates its representation and disburses its funding through another agency, as in DFID’s arrangement with AFD in parts of French West Africa, less than a third of the 10,837 donor missions fielded in the 31 countries surveyed in the CDF Progress Report of 2005 and used as the basis for monitoring the Paris Declaration were coordinated missions (Organisation for Economic Co-operation, Development (OECD) 2007, p. 64). In the view of several recipient countries in 2006 “there were no technical cooperation programmes ... that were genuinely country-led.”

In striving to define comparative advantages across agencies, and groups of agencies, there is considerable contestation. With different understandings of ownership, different “felt” if not acknowledged comparative advantages, and different agencies using different procedures, guidelines, training, panoply of tranche release conditionalities, donor-influenced performance indicators and policy preferences, it is a wonder that there is any commonality of vision leading to coordination and harmonization. The reality check on the new aid modalities and the likelihood of their helping to achieve the MDGs and the broader development objectives, is the recipient countries’ views of what it is like to be party to this circus of initiatives. The comments of the DAC Chair in his recent overview of experience makes for depressing reading, knowing how much has been done just to get this far:

Information suggests that actions in support of the Paris agenda are being taken in at least 60 countries. Broad and substantial implementation is at hand in 5–8 countries and good, but less extensive, implementation in 10–15 others (Organisation for Economic Co-operation, Development (OECD) 2007, p. 29).

The optimism surrounding the new aid modalities at the turn of the century has certainly been accompanied by and, perhaps for some donors, replaced by a realism acquired from the near-decade of experience. SWaps and DBS, as currently conceived, could be relegated to yet another historical flavour of the month.

Concluding remarks

If the new aid modalities were intended to make aid transactions less costly for recipient countries, to be more coherent, and to have greater impact on the achievement of the MDGs, the experiences reflected in this review suggest that there is a mixed tally of results to date. There may be fewer missions and donor-generated analyses in the “successful” aid-effectiveness-reforming countries, but there are still large numbers of these and still

only a relatively small proportion of aid is provided in the form of the new aid modalities. In fact, while the number of SWAPs may have increased, the proportion of GBS has declined (from 6.5% of total ODA in 2001 to 2.4% in 2005, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)/Development Assistance Committee (DAC) 2007), and a mixed portfolio is far more common in practice, and advocated in many of the agency guidelines, than was the case just a few years ago.

Despite increased aid for education, which has made possible an expansion of access, and despite the use of the new aid modalities (albeit in hybrid forms), the same intractable problems largely remain: how to make a dent in quality and how to develop institutional capacities throughout educational systems, from the central ministry down to the local school.

There have certainly been attitudinal changes, but the DAC's in-country monitoring that will report on donor behaviour will require more time before firm results are available. It is not yet clear that the attitudinal changes occurring today will bring about changes in practice tomorrow, in terms of facilitating government-led coordination of what is still a relatively unruly pack of donor agencies, notwithstanding the important commitments and declarations such as the Paris Declaration. It is estimated that "multi-donor programmes may require 15–20% more time and resources than traditional stand-alone projects", and as the DAC Chairman has further commented, "It will therefore be important to continue to look for incentives which encourage greater harmonisation and alignment by donors in the face of pressures to 'get on with the job'" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation, Development (OECD) 2007, p. 30).

Many of the first education SWAPs were developed in the late 1990s and focused on sub-Saharan Africa, but since then have extended to South Asia, Latin America, and East Asia. In some countries, education SWAPs were the handmaidens of direct budget support, particularly in countries with Poverty Reduction Strategies in which the education sector is a priority pillar. In other countries, development agencies went straight into direct budget support and did not use a SWAP as a means of developing the capacities or testing the waters. Despite the burgeoning of these new modalities of development assistance, they have not overtaken the perpetuation of project aid as the still-dominant form of support in any country, while capacity development still continues to be project-driven. To the extent that the stages along the way toward SWAP development or eligibility for DBS are of value in themselves, then perhaps the process-oriented, ex post performance indicators are the correct ones to use to judge progress and impact of the new modalities of aid to education. For the achievement of the core EFA goal of a quality education for all, however, much more work has to be done to ensure that the implementation interface is not driven by donors wanting to show the impact of the new aid modalities themselves, rather than of quality EFA. Without such a focus we could end up with new development cooperation vocabularies, but the higher levels of literacy and the further educational development that are desired and so desperately needed will only come about if such educational reform strategies are based on a national vocabulary for national educational development.

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