POLICY BRIEF

Lessons from piloting and testing scalable approaches to accelerated education in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania

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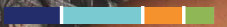African Child Policy Forum
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INTRODUCTION

This policy brief presents programming and policy lessons drawing on the Back2School experiences in piloting and testing interventions on accelerated education programs in the rural contexts of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania. It outlines the intervention approaches and strategies used in these rural contexts to improve the enrolment, retention, and school completion of rural out-of-school girls. It similarly documents programming and policy lessons and concludes with key policy messages and recommendations that could inform the future design of such projects.

The project looked at improving the education outcomes for rural out-of-school girls in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania. The project identified barriers such as overcrowded classrooms, teacher-centred teaching styles, poor infrastructure, and lack of learning materials. Other constraints included low teacher-pupil ratios, inadequate numbers of female teachers, and weak incentives for teachers. Systemic constraints had significant parental involvement, long distances to school, sociocultural practices, and poverty. At the more comprehensive policy level, bottlenecks included:

- The absence of harmonised national policies on accelerated education (except in Tanzania).

- Lack of national guidelines on accelerated education (Ethiopia had draft guidelines).

- Absence of updated curricula on accelerated education.

The most binding policy constraint was the structural location of accelerated education within ministries or departments in charge of adult education. From the findings, it became evident that countries were grappling with the same issues but varying severity and impact levels.

PILOTING AND TESTING OF SCALABLE, ACCELERATED EDUCATION PROGRAM INTERVENTION MODELS

Based on the findings from the baseline studies and consultations at the national level in each country, the project piloted and tested models for improving accelerated education - particularly enrolment and retention of girls in school. In Ethiopia, two features were introduced to the existing accelerated education models. First, disaggregated classroom learning was introduced in 6 pilot classrooms across three regions of Ethiopia for children aged 9-11 years (13 pupils) and 12-14 years (116 pupils). The 9-11-year-old children were taken through a condensed grade 1 and 2 curriculum over 10 months, while the 12-14-year-olds were taken through a condensed grade 3 and 4 curriculum over ten months. Likewise, a vocational training pathway was piloted for 127 children aged 13-17 years in 4 cohorts across two regions of Ethiopia. The children in the vocational training pathway were taken through four months of literacy and numeracy learning in two-hour weekly sessions. They then subsequently offered training at Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) centres for another four months. The vocational skills provided were basic: motorcycle repair, tailoring and food production.

These two work streams revealed that both approaches are scalable but require further refinement in content, delivery and partnerships to achieve optimal scalability and impact.

In Kenya, piloting and testing for scalability involved teacher training and community sensitization to improve the enrolment of girls in a pastoralist setting where female genital mutilation (FGM) is rampant. The aim was to test a scalable model for increasing the enrolment and retention of over-aged, out-of-school girls in the accelerated education programs in West Pokot County (Kenya).

> **The model proved viable since teachers trained in the project adopted more pupil-centred pedagogical styles, and community members began tracing out-of-school girls to enrol them on accelerated education programs.**

In Tanzania, the project piloted harmonizing the existing accelerated education curriculum (COBET) with the formal school curriculum, teacher training on the blended curriculum, and sensitization of parents on the value of children's education. The existing COBET curriculum was reviewed with Ministry of Education officials at the regional level to harmonize it with the formal curriculum. The initiative arose from the realization that the traditional curriculum is updated regularly. Still, the COBET curriculum was hardly ever updated. Yet, the pupils graduating from COBET are expected to join formal schooling and seamlessly transition from the COBET curriculum to the traditional system. After harmonization, teachers were trained on the updated curriculum. This experience has attracted the attention of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, and the Back2School Project partner in Tanzania will be among the organizations invited to help shape national conversations on reviewing the national education curriculum.

FINDINGS FROM PILOTING AND TESTING: AN OVERVIEW

The findings from piloting and testing reveal that age-appropriate classroom disaggregation improves pupil participation in the classroom and could potentially improve retention and other learning outcomes. In Tanzania, age-appropriate classroom disaggregation is built into the COBET model in cohorts 1 and 2 pupil admission and learning streams based on age. In Ethiopia, where it was piloted for the first time, it seems to have worked, and a cumulative total of 260 learners (107 males and 153 Females) completed their classes successfully.

> **The Back2School project similarly piloted two vocational training pathways based on the age groupings of children in Ethiopia. Of the 132 registered learners (55 males and 77 females), 106 (41 males and 65 Females) completed courses in different fields.**

Age-appropriate disaggregation may not be suitable in all learning contexts. In Kenya, for instance, age segregation in one school led to discrimination against over-age girls who had been rescued from FGM and re-enrolled into formal schooling. When these girls were mixed with pupils in the normal learning streams and teachers encouraged peer support, the learning environment and pupil classroom participation improved. Once more, the period over which this was tested was relatively short, and longer durations will be required to test and fully document the various aspects of the feasibility and efficacy of age-related classroom disaggregation.

The vocational training pathway offers an essential avenue for children who ordinarily would not want to pursue formal education from primary to secondary and eventually university or college education. This could be due to the children's feeling that they are old and would not want to delay entry into the job market for several years. It could also be the result of extenuating circumstances at the household level that might include poverty, the death of a parent or both, teenage motherhood, or the presence of more children in the same financially distressed household, leading to parents choosing to educate some but not others. The piloting achieved proof of concept – providing a vocational training pathway for children who have never been to school is feasible.

There has been considerable interest in replicating the experience and learning from the project. However, more needs to be done to refine the model. Discussions at a regional workshop convened to share and reflect on the evidence from the Back2School project with directors of education drawn from Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania revolved around several issues that must be addressed before the model can be scaled out. These proposals included considering longer instructional times per day for the children in numeracy, literacy and vocational training. The content and duration of these courses need to be done with guidance from vocational training institutions, and this must be complemented with a certification system approved by the government. Besides, the course content and training duration must be aligned with local job market realities.

LESSONS FROM PILOTING AND TESTING

There are many lessons to be learnt from the Back2School research project implementation. First, locally driven initiatives work the best because they build ownership and goodwill, which are critical for scaling the impact of interventions. The meaningful involvement of parents, teachers, community members and Ministry of Education officials resulted in several important outcomes. In Ethiopia, the project built partnerships with schools and TVET centres to facilitate the training of children enrolled in accelerated education. For instance, Hawassa Polytechnic College negotiated with private businesses (i.e., motorbike garage owners) to allow vocational trainees to use privately owned garages for practical skills training.

In Kenya, parents and community members volunteered to trace and facilitate the enrolment of children who had either dropped out of school or those who had never been to school but were still of school-going age. This mobilisation drive prompted five school principals to offer their schools to be used as rescue centres for girls rescued from early marriage or FGM, and 20 head teachers joined the initiative of tracking and re-enrolling out-of-school children in their areas. In Tanzania, parents joined hands in providing meals for children in school and, in one school, constructing a classroom block and a toilet facility with separate doors for boys and girls.

The second lesson is that good and promising practices exist in individual schools but are not widely disseminated. These include teachers who have innovated methods of assessing children's moods daily (Ethiopia) and those who have found ways of keeping robust pupil attendance data and using it for planning and administration purposes (Tanzania). Community members also formed a WhatsApp group to help trace and re-enrol children out of school (Kenya). These promising innovations are locally driven, cost-effective and can be scaled at no significant costs, and they need to be mounted in future phases of similar projects. The lessons and impact from these innovations could be scaled in future similar interventions.

Developing partnerships with Ministries of Education is crucial for improving education. Governments are looking for innovative solutions, but involving them in the research process increases the likelihood of policy and practice change. Lessons from this project can be applied in other contexts, such as involving parents in education and improving classroom pedagogies. These measures improve learning outcomes and create safe school environments, even with limited resources.

LESSONS ON PROGRAMMING PRACTICES

Several adjustments could have been made in the delivery of the project. Firstly, engagements with parents and local communities should have started earlier in the research project's design. This would have allowed their issues to be addressed in the study and involved in data analysis for more valid findings. Regular reflection sessions and collaboration with stakeholders would have helped identify and solve challenges. However, the project lacked the necessary time and resources for this process.

Secondly, it would be beneficial to explore ways of involving senior government officials in the design and execution of baseline assessments in future projects and bringing them in as co-researchers, which increases the likelihood that they will champion the research evidence at higher policy levels. In previous studies, district and regional officials were involved, but including national officials earlier would have had a more significant impact.

The importance of Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) was realized later in the research project, but it should have been prioritized from the beginning. Future projects should focus on GESI from the design stage and train all involved on its principles. Action research should be conducted to inform practice and share learnings with policymakers and other communities.

Fourth, future projects should consider using mixed-method designs to improve the validity and reliability of scaling impact research. It is also essential to explore practical and flexible ways of collecting relevant data for schools' and ministries' education decision-making. Efforts should be made to involve schools, parents, and ministries of education in analyzing and reflecting on the collected data.

Finally, Future projects should have a monitoring and evaluation framework to document positive and negative outcomes and lessons. This requires training and support for the implementation teams to embrace adaptive learning. Documenting failures and lessons is vital for other projects to learn from and avoid repeating mistakes. This requires a mindset open to learning and a programming culture that encourages learning through training and mentorship.

KEY POLICY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Communities must be at the centre of improvements in accelerated education programs:** To bring children back to school, governments and organisations must collaborate with communities. This includes identifying local leaders, leveraging local drivers of change, and supporting proven innovations. Strengthening local capacities and enforcing laws against harmful practices like FGM, child marriages, and child labour are also crucial. Communities need to be educated about the negative effects of these practices, and infringements should be dealt with firmly.

2. **Improvements in school infrastructure require urgent attention:** Many rural areas have insufficient and poor-quality school infrastructure, with long distances between schools. Classrooms are overcrowded, toilets are dilapidated, and there is a shortage of learning materials. Governments should incentivise the private sector and international partners to improve infrastructure, and work with local communities

> **There is a very high risk that children who enrol will still drop out if there is inadequate infrastructure, learning materials and other equipment in the schools.**

through cost-sharing, affirmative action investments, and government-sourced development.

3. **Teacher recruitment, training and continuing professional development:** Schools with low teacher-pupil ratios are better equipped to handle the unique needs of children who enrol late or have experienced trauma. However, many schools are understaffed, making it difficult for teachers to provide specialised attention to these students. To address the issues of non-enrolment and dropout, governments should invest in training, better pay, and deployment of teachers to schools with over-age learners. Continuing professional development for teachers should also be prioritised.

4. **Policy guidelines should address the complex contexts of accelerated education:** Policies and guidelines that treat accelerated education learners as a uniform category often assume that all learners would wish to pursue the formal academic pathway. This might not always be the case. Besides, learners vary vastly in terms of age, sex, and socioeconomic background, and some learners might have varying forms of disabilities. Policies and guidelines must recognise these characteristics and make provisions for handling them. Providing alternative learning pathways for these children aligned with their contexts and life goals is essential. This might require that policies and guidelines recognise vocational training, continuing learning programs, and shorter tailor-made learning (literacy and numeracy) curricula as integral components of accelerated education.

5. **Strengthen the linkages between accelerated education and the formal schooling system, including vocational training:** Policies and guidelines must be clear on how children transition between accelerated education and formal schooling or vocational training. Clear certification guidelines and standards should enable children to move from one learning pathway to the next. This will require closer supervision and support so that children transitioning from one learning module to another are not disadvantaged and thus drop out.

6. **Creating a Culture of Gender Equity and Social Inclusion in Accelerated Learning Programmes:** To make AEPs more equitable and inclusive, policymakers and implementers can consider inculcating GESI in the curriculum. Some countries have developed curricula that advocate for GESI in the content, such as a poem that addresses discrimination against those with disabilities. By incorporating elements that support GESI within the curriculum, such as addressing discrimination and challenging gender norms, schools can become catalysts for social change and inclusivity. There is also the need to identify and address hidden costs associated with attending school, such as access to textbooks and uniforms. Policies that mitigate these costs, particularly for girls, can significantly reduce dropout rates and contribute to a more inclusive educational system.

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