

Sustainable solutions for
improving education in
developing countries

Overcoming political
challenges to enhance
teaching and learning

Designing and managing
programmes that will
have lasting outcomes

Cracking the sustainability code



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Sustainable outcomes demand tough choices

Nobody is interested in making an impact that lasts only for the length of the project and then disappears. Yet, cracking the sustainability code remains extremely challenging.

This magazine shares Cambridge Education's perspective on, and experience of, creating lasting outcomes, with a view to informing the sustainability debate as it evolves. In particular, my colleagues discuss the importance of engaging with those decision-makers at the top of education systems who hold the power to initiate reform, maintain momentum or stop it in its tracks. They are the ones who can embed change and ensure that it is disseminated more widely.

Likewise, we highlight the need to design multifaceted programmes that influence many different parts of the system. Focusing on reforming teacher training alone, for example, may enjoy some success in the short term. But, unless you reform the interlocking

parts of the system that support teacher performance, then change can soon evaporate.

We need to find the right balance: progress in the classroom and at the community level, but also progress at the policy and decision-making level. This is particularly hard within the short timeframe that donors are often working to. Their strategies must meet taxpayer scrutiny and offer value for money, but must also align with the priorities of recipient governments. Delivery units may be one answer – but not in all circumstances.

As education specialists, we can play a role by helping design and implement innovative projects that will help both donors and governments achieve their ambitions.

Real progress is possible
Our contributors share their thoughts and experiences on how best to walk these fine lines. They ask testing and long-standing questions. But, what comes through is the belief that change can and does happen. Reform positively impacts children's lives – providing the environment is supportive, and there is time.

The challenge is how to accelerate that change – whether through delivery approaches, partnerships between the public and private sectors, or a single-minded focus on addressing disadvantaged groups. Like my colleagues, I am optimistic for the future of education in developing countries.

That optimism is based on the daily experience of working with both

experienced and younger education development professionals – an increasing number of whom are from the countries being supported. The articles by Caroline Jordan and Simon McGrath, reflecting on the UKFIET conference for early career professionals held earlier this summer, give food for thought.

Tomorrow's frontline practitioners will need more than technical know-how to be successful – they must also develop the diplomatic skills to facilitate and build consensus. For that, they need opportunities to gain experience, exposure and mentorship.

Andy Brock
Managing director,
international education,
Cambridge Education

Making performance pay

To achieve a long-term rise in standards, ministries must find ways of motivating teachers to perform better, says education technical director John Martin.



Jide Adeniyi-Jones/ESSPIN (top)
Dan Waistell/EQUIP-Tanzania (right)
English in Action (left)

Why do we get involved in education development? It's to help children learn better. Therefore, we want to help teachers become better teachers.

We implicitly understand that better performance is important, but unless we state this explicitly we risk being distracted by single aspects of performance. For example, training contributes to better performance but it is not the only contributory factor.

Teachers will only aspire to improve if they are incentivised to do so through pay and conditions linked to performance, if they are held accountable, and if they are satisfied in their jobs.

Do better, get promoted?

Promotion is typically on a linear scale, dependent on age rather than ability. If I get promoted, will I get paid more? Not much, because the gradient of pay from top to bottom is very gradual, offering little enticement to progress. Whether formal or informal, people need to be able to advance within a proper career gradient and pay scale. As teachers demonstrate progress, they can then be given additional responsibility. At the moment, anyone trying hard within the system is stifled. In many education systems, a head teacher would likely explain poor performance by saying: "I cannot hire teachers, fire or discipline them. I don't have a proper budget, and my resources are mediocre. How can I enhance the performance of my school if I can't control any of those things?"

The reason people ignore performance is that it's politically hard. If you plot a graph with technically hard to technically simple down one axis and politically hard to politically simple down the other, then you'll find lots of programmes that are technically hard and politically easy. For example, a complex teacher training programme is satisfying for pedagogists, creates quick and

measurable benefits, and threatens nobody's political interests in the host nation. But something technically simpler, such as changing systems of accountability or incentives within career structures, is politically hard and so does not get addressed by programmes.

As soon as we suggest a rewrite of the teacher training curriculum or restructuring the way teachers are promoted and paid, it becomes contentious. Especially as it's coming from outsiders. The minister knows he or she will immediately be faced by the unions, and other vested interests, which are resistant to change.

Grasp the nettle

If you're a teacher working in a culture where there's little responsibility, you're not held to account, and where performance isn't properly managed – then change feels threatening. Are they going to sack me? But it's not about that. It's about enabling high-performing people to gain positions of responsibility and accountability. If we just do the politically easy stuff, then we'll never find sustainable answers. A performance-focused path is full of potholes, but it is too important not to try. We must keep finding new ways to influence and shape policy. Revolution is unlikely, but gradual evolution can and does work. How do we build aspects of performance management into the existing pay scales? Once this is working well, how do we incentivise teachers a little more as they move up the ladder?

We need to create the willingness for change by using evidence to demonstrate the need for change. This will make the politically difficult issues more palatable and so embolden political will. To date, nobody has a very strong track record in doing this. No government has yet restructured an education system to make it more performance-based.

The incentive to be the first is clear.

Caught in the grassroots

Looking at girls' education holistically from the macro to micro level is not new in academia. Making it work in the field is. Sharon Tao has drawn from research, her own experiences as a gender advisor and the capability approach to make a sustainable difference.



Dan Weisheit/EQUIP-Tanzania

Many girls' education interventions in developing countries focus on the school and classroom. This is great. There is a continuing need for good support on issues such as teacher training and pedagogy, gender-based violence, clean toilets and girls' clubs. These interventions may well impact the lives of individual girls over the typical four-year project cycle. But once they've gone, the clock quickly rewinds.

Too often, organisations work in isolation. They centre on a singular constraint, so creating a vast landscape of girls' education projects that don't always align with each other, or produce a cohesive response. As a result, any changes are less meaningful and not sustained. Girls who are fortunate enough to fall under the spotlight may well enjoy better futures. The vast majority are left in the dark.

There's a risk that focusing solely on the classroom squeezes other constraints on girls' learning out of the picture. However, by looking at the whole picture from the macro

to micro level, we start to see where significant constraints also appear at home, in the community, and at the policy level.

The hardest task is to change deeply embedded social norms. When girls are still expected to fulfil traditional gender roles such as cooking, cleaning and fetching water after school – while their brothers have time to study or play – then teaching them to read and write won't lead to a fairer society.

This may sound bleak, but progress is possible. Meaningful change can come from an approach that is owned and co-ordinated by the government. The truth is that a solution like this is too big for one programme or one donor. Instead, we should support governments in tactically co-ordinating all the different programmes for maximum reach.



English in Action

Questions, not statements

Of course, grassroots interventions do have merit, but working with governments and system actors to address constraints on girls is the best way to ensure meaningful and sustainable change.

Once you get ministry co-ordination and dialogue going, the power dynamics will start to shift, with the government setting the agenda, creating the vision and plotting a longer-term course. All girls will then have the chance to benefit, not just those fortunate enough to fall within a project's four-year window.

I firmly believe that by strengthening the national institutions and policies surrounding girls' education, those of us with a deep concern for social justice can help ensure that all girls' education activities work together to provide a holistic, sustainable response, and bear the most fruit in transforming girls' capabilities to learn.

Transforming girls' education in Ghana

Working closely with the Ghanaian government, Sharon Tao explains how we devised an approach that aims to analyse and tackle gender inequalities using the capability approach.

It provides a powerful lens for considering the environmental, social and personal factors that can constrain girls' opportunities to learn.

This diagram shows how inequalities for girls in Ghana are interconnected and complex, and compound each other from the macro to micro level. By problematising and addressing these inequalities, we can start to improve girls' capability to learn.

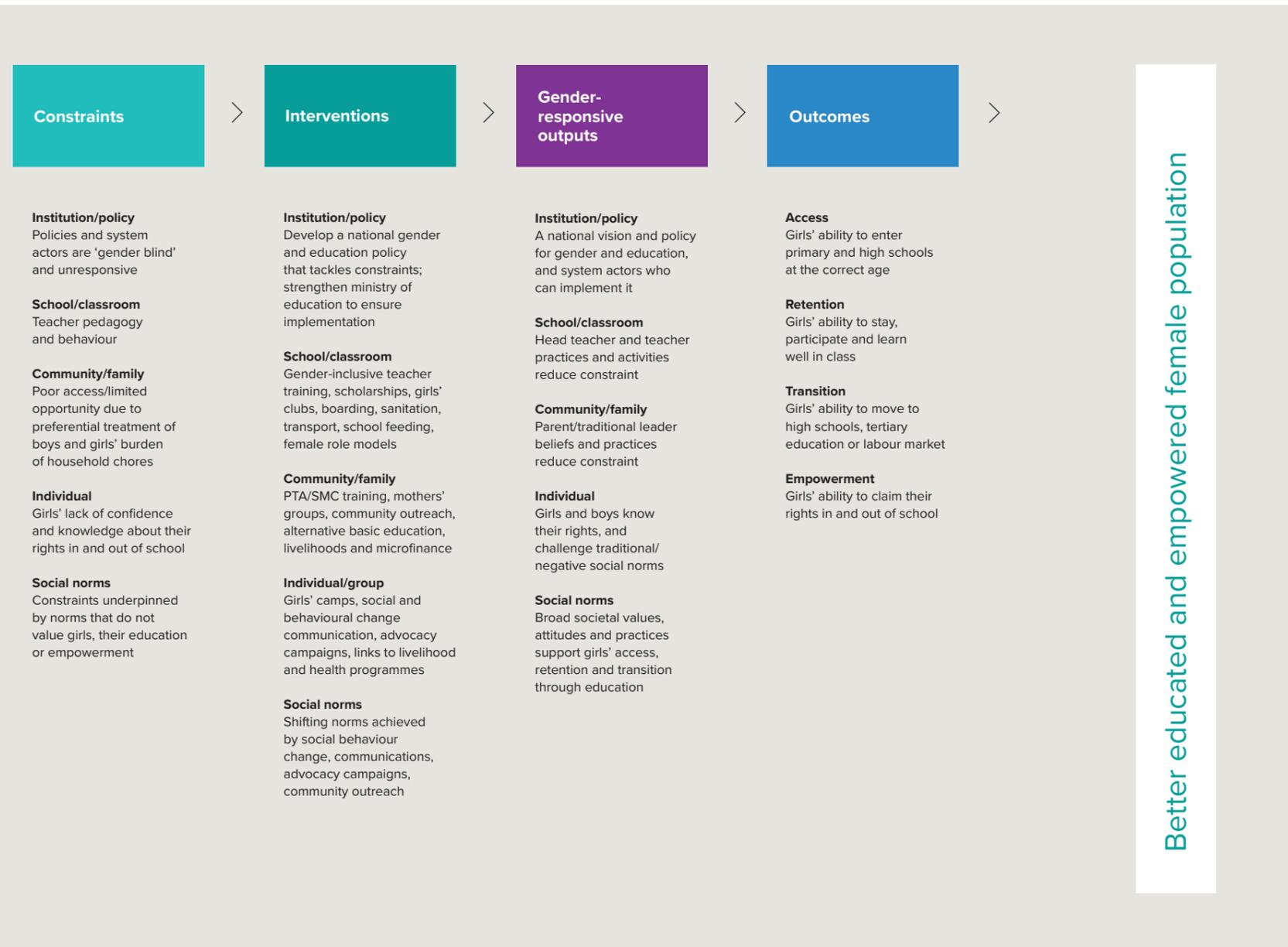
The Ministry of Education's Girls' Education Unit (GEU) provides a fulcrum for progress. Supported by us, this specialist unit performs research and analysis, contextualising varying constraints for different regions of the country.

We also support the GEU in mapping what different girls' education programmes are doing, with a view to avoiding duplications. It enables any new initiative to be checked for alignment with the country's education priorities. The GEU identifies gaps and problems with provision, and asks: Can you help us to solve them?

By identifying the right combination of interventions across all levels – whether institution and policy, school and classroom, community and family, individual, or shifting social norms – they will start to achieve more sustainable outcomes in terms of access, transition and retention for girls.

The impact? A better educated and empowered female population in Ghana.





T-TEL comes at a critical moment

The Government of Ghana is determined to address poor learning outcomes and recognises that teaching is both a barrier and a solution to progress.

Through training and coaching provided under our UK aid-funded T-TEL programme, we are helping the government to transform the delivery of pre-service teacher education by improving the quality of teaching and learning in all 40 colleges of education (formerly teacher training colleges).

We are also working with national bodies and institutions as they develop the curriculum, policies and standards that will underpin this.

What do we hope to achieve?

Improved governance, management and pedagogical direction in all 40 public colleges of education with the direct participation of over 200 senior leaders.

Over 1500 tutors effectively using T-TEL

teaching and learning materials – freely accessible online – for lessons and tutorials.

Over 35,000 student teachers, better prepared, empowered and gender responsive for a career dedicated to improving young people.

Greater innovation and results in teacher education through fund investment of nearly £2M.

T-TEL



Delivery approach: yes or no?

Senior education and skills advisor Robin Todd served on a government delivery unit, assigned by former UK prime minister Gordon Brown. The model has since been exported worldwide. Is Robin still a cheerleader?

Delivery units look like the holy grail of development: political will combined with technical focus. Indeed, they can work extremely well, especially where the focus is on technically straightforward, measurable priorities such as teacher attendance, student attendance or facilities construction.

A unit may also be an appropriate intervention to improve an education system or a specific issue from 'poor' to 'adequate'. However, please don't believe anyone who sells a unit as a silver bullet solution for transformational change across an education system. In my experience, they get the best results in combination with a wider set of interventions to bring about performance improvement.

Of course, delivery systems vary considerably

by sector and country. Bear in mind that there is no one 'ideal structure' for a unit. Context is key. A heavily populated, centralised country like Malaysia will require a different approach to a vast, decentralised nation like Tanzania. Local innovation is often more effective than a top-down technocratic solution.

Act with humility

Rather than wield the big stick over the civil service, the unit's role is to add value by supporting interventions where performance is off-track. It's worth remembering that the unit itself does not deliver. Instead, it plays a role in supporting the system to deliver. You must remain self-critical and keep a close connection with frontline workers when analysing problems and developing solutions. There are some genuine caveats that come with

a delivery unit. They can bring a preoccupation with structure over substance. They can create parallel structures, systems and processes. They risk focusing on what's easily measurable in the short term rather than what's genuinely important in the long term. Unscrupulous governments will always find ways to pervert or manipulate them to suit their own interests. In the same way that a caterpillar can make itself look poisonous to a hungry bird, those ministries go through the right motions, but nothing ever changes.

Nevertheless, they can provide valuable cut-through and rapid progress. To keep control of the outcomes, it's important to keep sight of the unit's basic principles. Focus on a small number of things. Set up a direct line to the frontline. See the world through

the eyes of individual citizens rather than government financiers. Get evidence and resources flowing both ways.

A few years ago, I might have given a resounding thumbs-up for delivery units. But now, my response is more circumspect. The first step should always be to look at existing structures. If you can embed what you want to achieve as part of what you're doing already, then you don't need a delivery unit. If you can't, then a unit is perhaps the right call. I've seen talented people in government use them to improve delivery and make a massive difference to communities. But it won't happen without genuine political will.

Seize the moment

We helped to set up and run a delivery unit in Tanzania as part of the Big Results Now initiative, writes Robin Todd.

It was a privilege to be involved in that role. If I had to choose our biggest success, it was finding a way to create a direct flow of money from the finance ministry to schools.

We had set up a simple system of reporting and feedback that broke the silence between schools and central government. When you open channels of communication, you can start to change the relationship and power dynamics. Head teachers become motivated and more committed to delivery. Likewise, by using data in the right way – and basic is always better – then you can identify the key problems and start fixing them.

In particular, we learnt that money that was earmarked for schools was being syphoned off at local authority level. Without any predictability around funding, head teachers had no control around budget or preparation. Setting up a system that transferred money directly to the schools' bank accounts wasn't technically hard, but we then banged our heads against a political brick wall for 12 months.

When the new president was elected under a ticket to invest in education, we knew this was our moment. We managed to secure an audience, explained the constraint and he bought into our plan immediately. A matter of days later, the first payments were made. Every month since then, all 20,000 schools have been able to make plans for the future with certainty.



Time for change

International development senior consultant Marc van der Stouwe looks back on the successes and lessons of English in Action. He proposes the magic – and often missing – ingredient for sustainable change.



English in Action

If I had to capture in one word why English in Action (EIA) achieved so many of its sustainability objectives, it would be 'patience'. The Department for International Development (DFID) had a long-term view at the outset, and designed a nine-year programme. They chose to start with a model that had some time to prove itself, rather than a ready-made solution that might be immediately embedded within government policy.

We could then 'sell' that model to the government based on physical and technical evidence that it worked. Many international development projects simply do not have the chance to take into account the learning from implementation experiences, as well as institutional and contextual factors.

Another hurdle that all projects need to leap is how to create demand. Initiatives that are pushed onto a country rarely last. Our two-stage model allowed us to build strong demand in Bangladesh, based on the acceptance that improvement could only be achieved through radical change in classroom practices. We therefore had ownership from the key decision-makers from the start.

Even then, if the teachers hadn't found the initiatives useful, momentum would have soon petered out. They needed to feel that the training and

materials were making their work easier.

Again, time was crucial for getting the teachers on side. We were able to take a panoramic point of view and work on the dimensions that support teacher development – a challenge that would have proved too complex an issue to solve in the standard four or five-year project lifetime.

EIA therefore became part of wider system reform, even though that was originally outside the scope of the project. Again, this would have been hard without the luxury of a decade-long trajectory. Our iterative process had the freedom to adapt organically and so find an institutional model that worked within local constraints.

Much more than English

That said, the journey towards sustainability encountered severe challenges, and at times, partial failure. The biggest realisation was that English was only the tip of the iceberg. We simply couldn't institutionalise changes to English teaching without first adapting the whole system, including policy, curriculum and implementation across all subjects. This made the scope of the institutionalisation efforts broader in range, higher profile in political terms, and thus harder to negotiate. In hindsight, we also

fell into a common trap by approaching institutionalisation from the position of the project. We thought: What can we design that will fit neatly within the system? We should have instead looked at it from the perspective of the system. How much could the system absorb? What is the maximum level of change possible? When going for real change, you need to understand the realistic absorption capacity of systems and people.

Another key lesson was that sustainability doesn't happen by accident. We agreed on deliberate sustainability goals and strategy from the beginning, as moving from a 'project-based' to an institutional mode of implementation is a lengthy and complex process. I'd say now that well-defined sustainability strategies must be integrated with the overall programme strategy and adjustable over time. Our first strategy was kick-started in 2011, a full six years before the end of the project.

At the same time, with the wisdom of hindsight, I'd argue that even more time and resources are required to fully achieve sustainability, particularly in terms of building capacity within the government institutions. The duration and investment in systems strengthening are too often grossly underestimated.

English in Action is about change

It aims to increase social and economic inclusion for millions of Bangladeshis by developing English language skills for school students and adult learners.

The programme has reached 30 million people, including 51,000 teachers and 7 million students through its teacher education component.

Talking is good for you

Education advisor Caroline Jordan helped to organise UKFIET's 'Voices of the Next Generation' conference in June 2017, where she presented on her recent experiences in Tanzania.

Often, at major conferences, the presentations come from those with 30+ years' experience in the field, because they have the knowledge and perspective to provide rigour. Don't get me wrong. I totally understand the need for rigour. But while we can learn plenty by watching and listening, there's no substitute for doing it yourself.

When we drew up guidelines for the conference, we said it should be 'by young professionals for young professionals'. But then we reflected that 'early career' was better, as age and experience don't always walk hand in hand.

We saw the benefit in asking a few senior operators to lead thematic discussions. And we asked people to share moments that had gone wrong in their careers, so we could all learn from their experiences, both good and bad – the 'cock-up club' was extremely popular and useful. Frustration often comes with change programmes. Sometimes you need to accept that the change you want is too big for you to achieve alone. The better path is to share the load and focus on smaller changes you can feel proud of, and then see where those baby steps lead.

It's common to come into the profession with a Masters – you have the theory but need practice. The first scars teach you that nothing goes absolutely perfectly. And from early disappointments you learn who you should and shouldn't work with.

I led a shared session addressing barriers to girls' education in Tanzania and inviting attendees to offer solutions. Feedback was fantastic, so we plan to conduct similar workshops at future events. I'm looking forward to the next opportunity to present. Forums like this allow you to share experiences and better understand where they are most relevant.



Dan Waistell/EQUIP-Tanzania

Target January

I'm a big believer that a diversity of perspectives leads to new ideas. In my career to date, I've never felt inhibited because of my age. On the contrary, I've received many opportunities to take ownership of assignments. This includes visiting projects with different constraints and aims, due to their geographical or cultural context. The challenge is to adapt quickly and grasp the priorities and drivers, so you can find opportunities to add value.

I've recently worked on EQUIP-Tanzania, the UK aid-funded programme aiming to help 2.3 million primary students gain a better start in education. Our team's brief was to identify activities that would better support girls' learning.

We picked up on national data that shows more girls (35%) are failing to make the transition to secondary school than boys (30%). Children leave primary school in September, but then don't start secondary school until January. In that window, girls might get married or become housemaids, or just drop out of the system. EQUIP works at primary level. We saw an urgent need to get involved at this transition point, to keep girls engaged in education for long enough to start secondary school.

How? We designed a programme of mentoring and community learning that encourages the girls to discuss issues they face going into adolescence. For many, this is the first time they have had the opportunity to talk openly, or share their hopes and fears. We are also finding ways to prepare girls for this crucial window earlier in their last year at primary.

This won't solve the whole problem of early marriage and child labour, but it can help. We know that the lives of those girls who make it to January will follow a far better trajectory.

Innovation, with a small 'i'

Professor Simon McGrath, UNESCO Chair in the Political Economy of Education, was a leading proponent of 'Voices of the Next Generation'. He reflects on the need for both youthful energy and grizzled experience when tackling long-standing problems.



The closer you work to policy, the more you need a clear appreciation of what has and hasn't worked in the past. I wouldn't say there's a deliberate imbalance in the sector towards those with age and experience but a PhD will only take you so far. There's a negative perception around management consultants and policy advisories that push forward very bright young people who think in theories rather than real world challenges. Unless you can bridge the two, clients will remain sceptical of your authority.

An understanding of what has happened before is a vital part of

any theory of change. How do we practically get from here to there? What will get in the way of implementing the grand plan? Why haven't people already done this? Often, experience is the only way to learn how change happens and that it won't happen in the way you anticipate. That's where mentorship can highlight some of the potential flaws in a theory that seems watertight on paper.

Perhaps the most uncomfortable truth is that things always take longer than you think they should. People are complex and fallible. Just because something feels logical, it doesn't mean it

will happen. You need to gain resilience and live with the frustration that things move slower than you think they should do. Or that people are more stubborn than you think they should be.

Of course, it's rarely stubbornness for the sake of it. They have good, rational reasons, even if their context is not instantly clear from your perspective. You need empathy for their frustrations, if you want to influence them. There may be immovable constraints that stop them from choosing the path you think will help them most.

Small steps, big journey
Innovation is one of those throwaway jargon words. But it's also very necessary in development. I prefer to spell it with a small 'i'. Occasionally something happens that is so earth-shattering that it's remarkable. But usually it is people doing old things in smarter ways.

Some ideas are too off-the-wall and therefore impractical. Others are not innovative at all, just new to an individual despite having been tried many times before. People who have been around for 20 years will be better able to identify when an idea is good, and when it will or won't

work. But we must keep answering the hardest questions in new ways.

Fresh perspective needed
There's a tension here. We need fresh perspective and a youthful desire to prove things that other generations have not. But let's temper that restless energy with experience.

This is especially critical in today's education environment where risk is such a delicate consideration. Despite talk of coming at development like venture capitalists, we shouldn't forget that most donors are extremely risk-averse for understandable political reasons. Yet, without risk very little

innovation is possible. How do we find the balance of risk and reward?

That's where diversity of ideas can be fast-tracked by mentorship and support. Those with experience need to share whatever knowledge we've picked up that can help the next generation take our work to the next level. It's not that they don't know the answers. It's just that everybody struggles with the same practical challenges of how to make things work. If you want to make the change, then learn from our mistakes.

Perhaps a better word for experience is resilience.

Central to that is a strong belief that what you're doing is worthwhile, and that there's a difference to be made, even if it feels like hard work.

Without that motivation, you won't open your laptop each morning or board the next plane. You must never lose that sincere conviction that your actions can help the world become a better place.

All eyes on the first thousand days

In this Q&A, senior education advisor Barbara Payne issues a rallying cry for cross-disciplinary co-operation to improve early childhood development.



Vicky Kelly

What is your current focus in early childhood development?

Like many others, I've been fascinated to see new research emerge on the effect of nutrition and adult interaction on infants' brains. It depresses me that an undernourished three-year-old's brain is literally half the size of that of a well-fed child's, diminishing their entire cognitive potential. For many years, received wisdom was that primary education mattered most. Governments paid little attention to a child's pre-school years – the first thousand days. Now, they can't afford not to.

Does this call for a different mindset?

Yes. Rather than look at the chapters of early childhood in isolation, we should picture the full narrative. Let's overlap all the factors that impact parents and children: nutrition, health, water and sanitation, child and social protection, and, of course, education. It's encouraging to see a paradigm shift already starting in international development. I've recently been involved in network meetings across different disciplines, and we're growing in numbers, information and resources.

Until recently, you wouldn't have heard talk about getting a better return on investment by thinking in terms of early childhood rather than textbooks and teachers. Now, it's on the agenda.

How might a programme work?

Let's use a scenario. By working together, we could improve nutrition for an adolescent girl before she becomes a mother. Then encourage the same new mother to talk to her children and mediate their interaction with the world. The next step is to establish an early years curriculum for

her children that stresses the importance of play, dance and song, instead of learning by rote. Undoubtedly, cross-disciplinary business cases are more complex to sell, but a strategy that prioritises alliance over going it alone will be more effective, both in terms of cost and performance.

If we can break down the silos that exist within development, then we can start to break some of the vicious cycles that endure around adolescent pregnancy, malnutrition and poor education outcomes.

Dan Waistell/EQUIP-Tanzania



The advantages of nutrition and stimulation



One example of how community feeding and targeted adult interaction can boost the learning abilities in children's brains came in EQUIP-Tanzania. In areas of the country where children learnt to speak in their mother tongue – rather than Kiswahili – we launched a school-readiness programme so they did not immediately fall behind when they entered primary school.

We set up 1000 makeshift centres in rented buildings, where the children received 14 weeks' training in Kiswahili from community members. These unsung heroes were all volunteers – mostly young school leavers – who used their imagination to engage the children in storytelling. Classes revolved around big books that were painted by local artists and brought to life with a colourful array of masks, puppets and role-play.

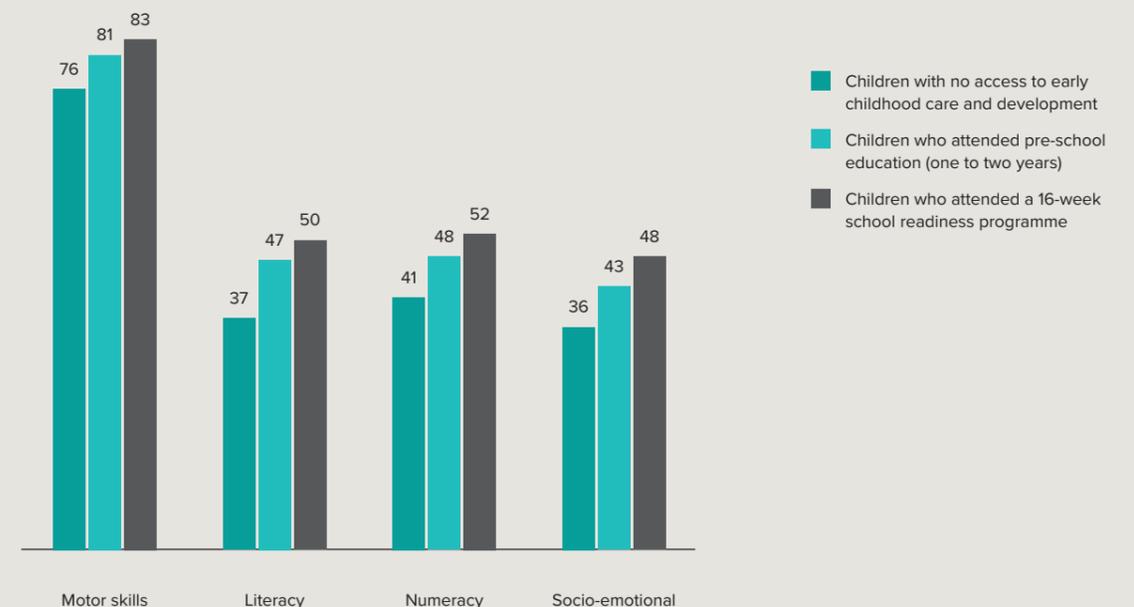
The wider community began providing porridge and even building classrooms themselves. Many classes started under a tree and within a few months they moved into a locally constructed 'school'. The project was such a success that another 4000 centres opened, and the lessons from the initiative were absorbed into the national school readiness programme.

It was an extraordinary phenomenon. In just 14 weeks, these children were more curious, appreciative, well behaved and receptive to learning than their peers who had been in school for two years with highly qualified teachers. Parents reported that their behaviour improved at home, which is something we're exploring in more detail. This isn't subjective – Save The Children's International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA) showed the children excelling in all areas including motor skills, numeracy and literacy. Most importantly, they had learnt enough Kiswahili to start primary school on an even footing with their peers.

Results of EQUIP-Tanzania

Children who attended the school readiness programme were ahead of their peers when assessed in motor skills, numeracy, literacy and socio-emotional development.

Average IDELA score by group (%)



This sample of 585 boys and 606 girls was made up of children who had just begun Grade I in the Mara, Simiyu, Kigoma, Dodoma, Shinyanga, Lindi and Tabora regions.

Dan Waistell/EQUIP-Tanzania

Opening opportunities with connected thinking.

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