

## Notes from the open breakout sessions:

*EBA seminar: Aid to Education – What Works in a Complex World?*  
(11 May 2016)

### Session I - What are the conclusions for aid to education?

Chair: Gerd-Hanne Fosen, NORAD

Notetaker: Per Trulsson, EBA

The discussion centered primarily on three broad subject matters: impact evaluations, ownership and challenges in evaluating aid to education. Prof. Glewwe initiated the discussion by noticing that the World Bank and IDB undertake impact evaluations and suggested that perhaps others should be doing more of that as well. It was noted that impact evaluations are expensive to undertake and unless additional financial resources are provided for evaluation departments, more impact evaluations would likely imply less other kinds of evaluations. In the multilateral development banks, and other multilateral organizations, this is primarily an issue that would need to be addressed in the boards of the organizations concerned (where e.g. Sweden, Norway and others are members and thus do have a say). An additional dimension in the academic community is that apart from being expensive to undertake, impact evaluations rarely are considered an academic merit. So the incentives are largely lacking there. On the cost aspect it was mentioned that the World Bank has a system whereby 2-3% of the cost of each project should be ear-marked for evaluation.

In this context it was also noted that both the teams of Prof. Glewwe's and Prof. Samoff's had discarded a large number of evaluations for being of inadequate quality – more than 90%. This begs the question of whether there are cost savings to be done in other types of evaluations that could be used for undertaking more and better quality impact evaluations.

The question of ownership was another important part of the discussion. It was mentioned that ownership is an integral part of results agenda. Results should be defined in terms of what the partners are expecting to achieve, rather than what donors want to see happening. Measuring results thus also needs to be an iterative process where the ultimate beneficiaries are integral to the process – and where in fact process may be just as important as results achieved.

The importance of ownership further came into play in the context of scaling up projects that show promising results. The NORAD experience was that the most successful examples of scaling up tended to materialize when the governments concerned took ownership – where donors did so, the scaling up process more often seemed to fail.

With specific reference to evaluating impact in education, it was noted that far too much evaluation is concerned with output level results, such as whether pupils can read or do math. In the end, it was argued, education is about making people more knowledgeable and empowered individuals that can contribute to societal development. However, this is rarely measured. NORAD noted that they often had difficulties defining the right indicators at the project level for initiatives in the education sector. Identifying base-lines was another challenge mentioned.

Finally, and more specifically, arguing for adult education it was noted that if the parents can't read, their kids are less likely to learn how to read as well. So, educate the parents first!

## **Session II – What are the conclusions for Swedish aid to education?**

Chair: Stellan Arvidsson Hyving, Sida  
Notes: Jan Pettersson, EBA

At this session, though no conclusions can be said to have been drawn, the potential for the two reports to affect policy formation, the content of the revised policy platform, Sida's role, and a number of other questions were discussed.

While the two studies have a lot of conclusions of what tend to work, they do not provide any conclusions such as, for example, capacity building in pre-primary school. Thus, they do not really help Sida to decide on what to focus on (as, for example, the importance of the basic level education, as in Pauline Rose's talk). Since the decision of the new aid policy platform has been delayed, there is an opportunity for the reports to feed into that process, and it is important to reflect on how. More generally, it is important for EBA to try to make sure that output is read and considered by policy actors.

Education has not received a lot of attention during the latest years but there are attempts to turn education into a priority area for the government. Apparently, the revised framework has education and science as a separate section (and the policy framework will be used as a reference for yearly budget planning). Issues raised related to this issue included what the new framework/platform will contain and the extent to which it will relate to recipient countries own documents (e.g. PRSPs); the link in the current framework to economic growth; the influence of results-based management on Swedish development policy; and the possibilities to expand the number of countries for Swedish aid to education (from today's essentially five, of which Afghanistan, Cambodia and Tanzania are the largest).

Relating to Sida's role, it was argued that one need to acknowledge that aid to education is a complex web of activities, there are not only aid through the countries via the embassies but also via the framework agreement with CSO:s and multilaterals. Previously, Sida should just be a channel of funding, but now Sida faces increased demand to take a more active role as a development partner. Also, it is dangerous to assume that there is consensus of what should be done. Sida could be involved in the discussion of what should be promoted in order to depoliticize what is quality. While the country strategies are setting limits of what types of objectives to focus on, and though education is seldom mentioned as a results area in the strategies, sometimes Sida can use education as a means to reach other results listed in the strategies. Thus, there are some room to increase aid to education in the current setting. However, there are limits to what Sida can do in terms of capacity constraints, not least related to personnel, so focusing on three countries is maybe what Sida can manage.

A participant pointed at the importance of addressing the content of education – not to focus solely on reading and math – in particular in terms of sustainability, there is need for a broader understanding of educational outcomes. Thus, evaluations need to also consider things that are not easy to grasp, to acknowledge the complexity of the system. The question of target audiences in the report by Samoff et al. is very pertinent, and important to realize that incentives differ between, say, managers, teachers and students. This also speaks for donors not only to work through ministries but also through lower level officials, NGOs etc. Another participant pointed at the importance to focus on targeted interventions in evaluations, especially through RCTs.

Other issues raised where the importance of coordination and labour division between donors as well as for donor plans to feed into countries own planning instead of replacing or overlapping them, and the lack of grassroots perspectives in policy formation. Non-disbursement of funds and corruption are still important limitations for national education systems to work. A question was raised on the challenges of implementing target 4.7 in the Sustainable Development Goals (“By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of

peace and non violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development”).

### **Session III – What are the conclusions for future synthesis evaluations in development?**

Chair: Arne Bigsten, EBA

Notes: Markus Burman, EBA

The discussion in this breakout session did not lead up to a shared conclusions but it can be summarized in terms of five answers to the overall question of the session: What are the conclusions for future synthesis evaluations in development cooperation?

1. Synthesis Evaluations have a potential to bring clear value for decision makers in development aid, and as a public good.

2. These study's will have to take somewhat different point of departures; they should use different kinds of research questions and scientific methods to be able to capture for instance contextual factors in aid interventions. It is also important to analyze the benefits of interventions in relation to their costs. The question why something works is of importance. Many of the most important and interesting questions are difficult to answer in a scientific way.

3. Many difficulties concerning synthesis evaluations and systematic reviews (in relation to their findings) go back to the underlying base of the studies that are available or that researchers have chosen to use. There is a tendency that important studies are weeded out in the selection process. Another problem is publication bias and the fact that decision-makers in some contexts interfere into what should be studied and not.

4. Learning and use from these studies is still a challenge. Sometimes learning can be facilitated in the process of conducting the synthesis and recipients of knowledge should be involved in different ways. A learning perspective needs to permeate the synthesis process from the start, but should also affect reporting, communication and information in relation to the process with synthesis studies.

5. There is a need to coordinate work on synthesis and systematic reviews internationally. At the same time, there are strong factors that complicate such coordination (different perspectives on methodology, lack of standardization in relation to the synthesis process and not synchronized policy processes).

## **Session IV -**

### **What are the conclusions for evaluation in development cooperation?**

Chair: Joakim Molander, Sida

Notes: Eva Mineur, EBA

Since this session's focus was on conclusions for evaluations in development cooperation, the chair Joakim Molander started the session by problematize the very role of evaluations in general and in development cooperation in particular. In order to spur the discussion he started by pointing out some criticism of evaluations as phenomena he found in Joel Samoffs report. It worked fine to get the group, composed by many evaluations experts including Joel Samoff, engaged in discussions.

It was pointed out that the fact that there were two reports presented and discussed at the same time was a big advantage and a good move from EBA. They have completely different starting points regarding methodological choices and thus which studies to include in their reviews (depending on the studies choice of evaluation method). This showed that the issue of education aid is very complex and its input and output is evaluated in many different forms which is important to bear in mind when discussing effects and level of effectiveness.

Samoffs criticism of the massive use of evaluations without context specific ambitions is not new, as was pointed out in the discussion; the question is why we don't seem to learn from the past. RCTs, which was the method used in the studies reported on in the other report (by Glewwe et al) is actually very locally and context specific since a RCT study is done in one setting at one specific time and therefore you cannot draw general conclusions from them. Traditional regression analysis may be a good alternative since that method actually include many more variables in the analysis. However, today it seem like the RCTs are trendier to do than regressions, despite their limited scope.

The recipients focus is dismissed in most evaluations – how can Sida make sure to take the recipients perspective into account into their evaluations? There is a guideline for incorporating the users and recipients perspective, however in practice it is sometimes hard to succeed. One suggestion may be to divide the evaluations into separate follow-up streams. One targeting the politicians – as a report back mechanism and another focusing on the substance of the issue at hand e.g how the education sector develops in the country. Can this be an effective mean to reach the ones with the power to affect and change the policies, namely the politicians?

There is a limited use of evaluations because they are concerned too much with the internal validity. There is an obvious need to get the evaluations to the recipients end! When the recipients say they are not convinced by the evaluations made by the donor organisation then we have a momentum for change. Strong domestic research (in this case educational research) is needed

in order to produce own research on education that is valid. This means that there is a big reward in building capacity by investing in research communities (including infrastructure, institutes, PhD etc.). The goal should be to for us to follow the recipients countrys' own recommendations when investing in education.