

Innovative Approaches to Support Learning in Africa

Monday, March 8, 2010, 10:30 am – 2:30 pm

[Center for Universal Education](#) at Brookings, 1775 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC

On Monday, March 8, the Center for Universal Education at Brookings hosted two panel discussions on quality education in Africa in an effort to share innovative approaches to support student learning and to facilitate collaboration with stakeholders in the education development community. The first panel focused on improving student learning outcomes in the early grades and the second panel focused on education in post-conflict recovery states in West Africa.

The first panel featured the [William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#)'s approach to improving student learning through its Quality Education in Developing Countries Initiative (QEDC). The initiative is currently working in Ghana, India, Kenya, Mali, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda. Dana Schmidt of the Hewlett Foundation provided an overview of the QEDC strategy, explaining how the Hewlett Foundation is pursuing a three-pronged strategy to catalyze systemic improvements in student learning outcomes. The three-pronged strategy incorporates attention to and accountability for student learning, effective instructional models, and sufficient resources used effectively. Hewlett believes that investing in these three strategies will help enable governments and other actors to work together within a country to develop, fund and implement successful instructional models, continually monitor learning, and improve programs accordingly. This will lead to improved reading, math and critical thinking skills for students in government schools. Schmidt then introduced representatives of organizational grantees of the foundation who are working in each of the three strategic areas.

The first panelist to speak was Sara Ruto, the country coordinator for [Uwezo Kenya](#), which is an initiative that seeks to generate data on children's literacy and numeracy skills that can inform the general public, stimulate national debate and mobilize policy changes. The Uwezo-Kenya National Assessment is a household assessment to measure basic English and Kiswahili literacy and numeracy of school-aged children in East Africa. Ruto discussed the way in which these learning assessments have improved accountability and fomented change in Kenya. Uwezo emphasizes that parents and communities are in charge of their own development and supports them to make decisions about their children's education. Since many of the places where Uwezo works are communities that rely primarily on oral communications, they have developed a radio-based communications strategy to ensure that their programs and findings are widely disseminated. Furthermore, Uwezo has partnered with popular radio personalities to encourage listeners to demand better education for their children.

Through the Institute for Popular Education (IEP in French) in Mali, Director Maria Diarra Keita promotes the evidence-based adoption of effective instructional models. IEP is an organization she founded in 1993 to search for alternative ways of managing education in Mali. Keita highlighted the importance of education in Mali, a country that spends one-third of its national budget on education, and also cited the challenges of reconciling the co-existence of multiple pedagogical regimes that include classical French, mother-tongue and competency-based curricula. She further noted that memorization-based learning is not promoting actual learning and should be reconsidered as a measurement of such in Mali.

To demonstrate the work on improving the effectiveness of education funding, Stephane Stassen, a senior program coordinator at [Transparency International](#), presented work from the Africa Education Watch program on improving transparency and accountability in the use of primary education resources in seven African countries. Drawing upon the report "[Good governance lessons for primary education](#)", Stassen presented findings that a number of communities did not know how much money their school should expect or when it would arrive, despite policies around public displaying of budget information. Further, effective management of school resources was hindered by non-existent bookkeeping and infrequent inspections by district or national authorities. Moreover, many families in African countries that have abolished school fees

are still paying to send their children to school. This launched a discussion on the role that school fees play in ensuring the availability of education. Stassen said that free universal basic education is far off from being reality and decentralization of the education system has not been working to its fullest capacity.

The [Hewlett Foundation's Ward Heneveld](#) reflected that quality education has suffered more than is necessary with the increase of access to education, which is partly due to lack of engagement in the communities in which education programs are being implemented. Educational access without learning is not serving students or their communities, as many children receiving free basic education cannot read and write in early grades. He suggested that international donors need to work alongside country-level partners and engage civil society in the process of ensuring quality education.

In the “Post-Conflict Education in West Africa: A New Model for Learning?” session, panelists addressed the realities of recovery, reconstruction and expansion after armed conflict in the Mano River region of West Africa, which includes Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, as well as Cote d'Ivoire over the past decade. Innovations in supporting education in post-conflict contexts are based on the premise that quality education is essential for the future development of the Mano River region and the prevention of a return to violence. The panelists reflected on the complex picture of underlying fragility and development possibilities for education.

Michael Gibbons of [American University](#) opened the session by stressing the importance of reintegrating children into schools in post-conflict situations. His work with Bidemi Carrol and the International Rescue Committee's Legacy Initiative in the Mano River region examines education in post-conflict settings. He discussed the way in which policy leaders can begin thinking differently to support long-term stability through education. He recommended school governing bodies be representative of the populations they serve, allowing for widespread participation and inclusion of groups such as women, students and out of school youth. Further, strengthening the entire education system rather than just focusing on a few schools will lead to sustainable education practices in the country.

As director of the [International Rescue Committee's Legacy Initiative](#), Bidemi Carrol works in the Mano River region. Stating that education can be a foundation for peace, Carrol aims to develop and mainstream education innovations that provide marginalized children and youth access to relevant and protective learning and development opportunities in these countries. Posing the question “is restoring business as usual in education an adequate aspiration in post-conflict settings”, Carrol noted that understanding the roots of conflict – both political and social – is essential to avoiding a repetition of the past. For example, rebuilding schools that recreate the pre-conflict settings will no doubt again breed the same inequalities and social unsettling that caused the conflict. She emphasized the importance of donors making medium and long-term commitments in order to effectively build educational capacity in the region.

Marc Sommers, a Jennings Randolph senior fellow at the [U.S. Institute of Peace](#), reported on his recent research with youth in Sierra Leone. While the country has made substantial strides in education since the end of its 11-year civil conflict in 2002, Sommers found through personal interviews that Sierra Leonean youth are concerned with being considered an outcast from society and that this label was far worse than any others. Sommers also highlighted the concern over the difference between youth who are included in educational programming and those that are left out and the way in which this contributes to the ostracizing of certain youth from society. He said that youth themselves perceive not being educated as one of the main factors that make them an outcast in society. He noted the great divide between generations in the county and the need for a bridge between youth and adults to avoid future conflict. To mitigate further unrest in society, Sommers recommended that youth programs be focused geographically and provide access to every youth in the area, in addition to teaching tolerance between generations.