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MANY PATHS TO UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION: TIME TO REPLACE THE INDICATIVE FRAMEWORK WITH A REAL COUNTRY-DRIVEN APPROACH

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Introduction

The international community has repeatedly committed to making aid more effective, in part by ensuring country ownership over aid policies and strategies. This commitment to the Paris Principles was re-emphasized in 2008 in Accra where donors' practice of linking their aid to prescriptive conditions was highlighted as an important area for more accelerated reform. This policy brief examines the Education for All-Fast Track Initiative (FTI) in light of these international commitments to improving country ownership and reducing donor conditionalities.¹ For the 72 million children not in primary school around the world, the FTI is the most important global aid mechanism to support their learning. Improving the FTI's effectiveness is one step in improving the lives of some of the world's poorest children.

We argue that despite sincere efforts by the FTI to engage in a country-led process, the use of a specific global framework and its associated indicators across all contexts effectively results in limiting country ownership by imposing prescriptive, donor-designed solutions. We specifically examine the FTI's Indicative Framework (IF) and argue that it is neither a sensible nor legitimate basis for assisting in the allocation of resources to primary education in developing countries that are trying to achieve Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Instead we propose a process where technical tools are used to inform, not prescribe, country-level planning. Learning from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM), we recommend that the FTI should be guided globally by a set of core principles but that accountability for its investment should emanate from country-specific benchmarks and indicators. This is an especially timely moment to reconsider the IF and other related frameworks as considerable attention is being given to potential reform of the FTI or even its evolution into a Global Fund for Education (Sperling, 2009; Oxfam, 2010).

What is the Indicative Framework?

The IF was developed in 2004 and has been used as part of the qualification and negotiation process for receiving FTI Catalytic Fund (CF) allocations. It consists of indicators, norms or benchmarks² for the following variables: public revenues as percent of GDP; education expenditures as percent of national budget; primary education expenditures as percent of education budget (including grants); first grade intake rate for girls and boys; primary completion rate for girls and boys; percent of repeaters among girls and boy pupils; pupil-teacher ratio; average annual teacher salary as a multiple of GDP per capita; recurrent spending on items other than teacher compensation; annual number of hours of instruction; and proportion of girls and boys demonstrating sufficient reading fluency and comprehension after two years and at the end of primary school (FTI, 2009a).³

What are the Limitations of the Indicative Framework?

Each of the IF variables are in and of themselves useful metrics for assessing education systems, as are many other variables that are not included. However, in the case of the IF, the problem arises when these variables are combined into one framework and used as a global tool guiding resource allocation decisions. There are three main limitations with the IF:

1. **The IF lacks scientific validity.** The benchmarks in the IF were derived from a single, heavily critiqued study done in 2003. Research has shown that these benchmarks are not always the most important priorities for any given country to achieve universal primary education (UPE). There are many other benchmarks that have been equally important, if not more so, in achieving UPE across different contexts.
2. **The IF limits country ownership.** The way in which the IF is employed by the FTI as a global set of benchmarks to which all countries receiving funding must adhere results in a one-size-fits-all framework and effectively limits country-level ownership. The IF does not put country context as the starting point for developing comprehensive country-specific plans for education reform. As research has continually shown, there is no silver bullet for development. Tools developed to assist countries in achieving EFA should support the notion that there are multiple paths to reaching those goals and country-level actors must be at the center of the decision-making process of which path to pursue.
3. **The IF is not used systematically.** Given the inherent problems with the IF, it is not surprising that the recent mid-term evaluation of the FTI found that the IF is not viewed as a universally useful tool. At country level, the IF has been inconsistently applied and monitored, and at times determined to be of marginal influence.

What follows is a detailed discussion of these three limitations of the IF. Ultimately, we argue that the solution is not to invest in improving and perfecting the IF, but rather to learn from the GFATM

and develop a process where technical tools are employed to open up country-level discussion, not close it down.

Most fundamentally, the IF has limited scientific basis. It was derived from just one study conducted under World Bank auspices by Bruns et al. (2003). The recent independent Mid-Term Evaluation of the FTI (Cambridge Education et al., 2009) offers a detailed critique of this study. Essentially, the Bruns et al. study looked at indicators for 10 diverse countries that were more successful in reaching primary schooling targets and turned them into goals, or sometimes prescriptions, for less successful countries. Unfortunately, doing so is not optimal, sensible or even legitimate.⁴ It certainly does not represent the country-driven approach to aid to which the FTI aspires.

In its initial Framework document (FTI, 2004), one of the five guiding principles was *benchmarking*, in which the FTI encouraged “the use of indicative benchmarks (the FTI Indicative Framework) locally adapted to enlighten debate, in-country reporting on policies and performance, and mutual learning on what works to improve primary education outcomes which can provide lessons learned across countries for the acceleration of UPC [universal primary completion].” Throughout the Framework document, the phrase “locally adapted” is consistently appended to the usage of the Indicative Framework.

Yet, in practice, it is apparent that the IF was not consistently adapted to local contexts. For example, the indicator of *percentage of public revenue devoted to education* includes no scientific or technical answer to the question of what percent of the budget should be so directed. Countries vary widely partly determined by effort and priority, but also depending on the size of the overall public budget, on allocations to other sectors such as agriculture, health and transportation, and on specific features of the education system such as dropout and repetition rates. For example, after the EFA meeting in Dakar, Yemen was not on track to meet the EFA goals, but it was quite close to the IF benchmarks, with respect to allocations to the education sector and primary education and teacher salaries. Thus, in this case, the IF did not help to highlight the existing country-specific policy gaps, which were identified by the FTI mid-term evaluation team as low efficiency in the use of resources, high unit costs in education service delivery and demand-side constraints in access to and retention within schools (Abdulmalik et al., 2009).

In addition to the example of Yemen among developing countries, there is no uniformity across wealthier countries on this *percentage of public revenue devoted to education* indicator either. An IMF working paper by Verhoeven et al. (2007) found that trends in education outcomes are not directly related to spending trends in G7 countries. For example, between 1995 and 2003, the United Kingdom made above average improvements in education outcomes with relatively modest increases in spending while the United States attained lower outcomes with relatively more additional resources for education. There are multiple factors that impact the relationship between education spending and resources available per student, including efficiency in the education system. While the percentage of public revenue devoted to education can in some cases be a useful metric to track, it will not always be the case, and therefore should not be used as a globally prescribed benchmark.

This is also true of other IF indicators, such as *teacher salaries as a multiple of GDP per capita*. What the level of teachers’ salaries should be in relation to GDP will vary widely across contexts, making it very difficult to come up with a technically “correct” benchmark. It would be absurd to suggest that there should be uniformity across G-8 countries.

A global benchmark on *teacher salaries* can leave countries little room to maneuver in addressing their highly diverse and complex teacher compensation concerns. For example, in many countries teacher salaries are currently too low to attract sufficiently qualified teachers or to engender full-time commitment by teachers. On the other hand, a country emerging from conflict is likely to have a lower tax base and therefore a smaller public budget such that a set percentage allocated toward teacher compensation may restrict the number of teachers that the government can hire at the time when the national government needs to establish its legitimacy in part through the expanded delivery of basic public services such as education.

It is also politically and economically difficult to increase or decrease existing teacher salaries in many countries and this could have unintended consequences. For example, decreasing teacher salaries in an effort to lower the expenditure as a multiple of GDP would likely mean that older more experienced teachers with higher salaries would have to be replaced with less experienced or contract teachers who are lower on the pay scale in order to reduce the overall average teacher salaries. This substitution could have serious implications for the quality of education provided.

While it can be quite useful at times to analyze the level of expenditure on teacher salaries in relation to GDP, it is counter-productive to try and prescribe a specific level across all countries as the IF does. Indeed, the ability to hire the necessary number of teachers has numerous implications not only for reaching the universal primary education completion goal, but also for the quality of that education and in post-conflict contexts for lasting peace. In the World Bank report on education and post-conflict reconstruction entitled *Reshaping the Future*, Peter Buckland recognizes that individual country contexts will be different, but emphasizes the importance of returning children and youth to school, which often requires rapid increase in teacher hiring, as an indication of a “peace dividend” that can reinforce broad support for peace (2005).

In addition to the above problems with *percentage of public revenue devoted to education* and *teacher salaries as a multiple of GDP per capita for public expenditure*, Bruns et al.’s (2003) original data that formed the basis for the IF illustrates no uniformity in indicators across successful countries. For example, both Vietnam and Zimbabwe had close to a 100 percent primary completion rate (PCR) at the end of the 1990s and yet they differed considerably across indicators: 10.9 percent vs. 28.3 percent of public revenues devoted to education; 2.4 percent vs. 7.1 percent of GDP devoted to education; and 1:2 vs. 6:1 as the ratio of teacher salary to GDP per capita, respectively. Developing specific global benchmarks by averaging such disparate data is not a legitimate approach and one of the main reasons why the IF has limited scientific validity.

If one were to ask other researchers, education ministry staff, teachers, parents, students and civil society representatives which factors are critical to obtaining quality UPE as envisioned in EFA and MDG goals, one might get very different sets of IF variables including: the availability of early childhood education; adequate and proximal school facilities; qualified teachers; textbooks and other learning materials; school feeding programs; systematic early grade reading assessments; conditional cash transfer programs; outreach to marginal populations; AIDS incidence and response; availability of secondary school; post-primary employment opportunities; and others. In sum, the selected IF variables themselves have no more legitimacy than a comparable set of different variables and neither does setting some benchmark level for them.

Given these problems with the IF, it is not surprising that according to the FTI mid-term evaluation report, there has been “confusion” over how and when to apply the IF and it is not systematically used. Country case studies of IF application show that, in many cases, the framework was used “inconsistently”, “not routinely monitored” or of “marginal influence” (Cambridge Education et al., 2009). In some cases, the IF made things worse, not better. For example, Mali had a well-developed education planning framework prior to seeking FTI endorsement. However, an additional “accelerated action plan” was developed to ensure alignment and “compliance” with IF benchmarks. The mid-term evaluation team’s country desk study suggested that the design of a second parallel plan to “accelerate progress towards UPE” in order to support the request for FTI endorsement led to an overly ambitious plan that was “developed outside of the existing participative and consultative framework” and was “at odds with the FTI objective to support the development of credible plans” (Chiche, 2009a: vi, ix).

While the FTI may never have intended the IF to be interpreted so strictly by the education leadership in Mali, it is not the only country to do so. In Burkina Faso, the FTI mid-term evaluation team’s interviews with country-level stakeholders revealed the widespread perception among policymakers that the IF benchmarks were conditions (Chiche, 2009b). Clearly in these two examples, the aspiration on the part of FTI that the IF would foster policy dialogue and be locally adapted did not work.

The existence of a global framework linked to resource allocation decisions is interpreted as donor conditionality, which in many ways it is. The solution to the problems with the IF is not to improve the specific content within it or to develop a new global framework,⁵ but to find a different way of ensuring that existing good practice informs country-level education planning. A one-size-fits-all approach, no matter what the framework, will not help FTI effectively support children’s education.

Indeed, the recognition that country context is paramount has long been a canon of education and development policy and practice and has recently been formalized through international aid effectiveness agreements developed over the past decade. The 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness Principles includes a focus on *ownership* where partner countries exercise effective leadership over their own development policies and strategies; *alignment* where donors match support to national development strategies, institutions, and procedures; and *mutual accountability* where donors and partner countries are both responsible for the results. In the following High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Accra in September 2008, one of the four main actions for accelerating progress toward more effective aid centered on “conditionality”, where donors committed to shifting from a reliance on prescriptive conditions to conditions based on the recipient country’s own development objectives. Additionally, OECD-DAC’s Principles for Engagement in Fragile States (2007) include provisions to “take context as the starting point” in order to ensure recognition of different constraints of capacity, political will and legitimacy, as well as the differences between contexts of fragility in order to avoid blue-print approaches.

Ultimately, the FTI must recognize that there are many different paths to achieving universal primary education, as well as the other important MDG and EFA goals. Abandoning the approach of using global frameworks would be a step toward more effective aid and more country ownership and, most importantly, it would not have to mean abandoning accountability or a focus on results. In the following section we propose an alternative process by which countries develop and FTI endorses education plans.

What could replace the Indicative Framework?

Fortunately, there are alternatives to the IF and the approach of using one global technical framework for all countries. We recommend an approach that prioritizes country-level knowledge, ownership and action as well as data, responsibility and accountability. In doing so, we draw heavily on lessons learned from GFATM as well as existing successes from the FTI. Ultimately, replacing the IF with a more country-driven approach must occur within the context of overall FTI reform, fitting within, for example, efforts to enhance accountability and to ensure a wider participation of actors in the governance of the initiative.

Most importantly, a context-specific approach to indicators of country need and progress should be at the center of both the FTI's proposal development stage and its performance-measurement stage and these two key stages must be closely linked to each other. Determining the technical strength of a country's proposal for funding should relate directly to the means developed to measure success for implementing that proposal and the disbursement of any follow-on funding.

Each country receiving funding from the FTI must develop a national education plan, which is ideally based upon a comprehensive understanding of the state of education in the country and the implications of existing good practice for policy and program design. It is precisely this process of bringing existing research, promising practice and lessons from other countries that the IF aspires to do, but for all the reasons above, it falls short.

Instead of employing one global framework to fulfill this function, the FTI should develop a series of toolkits, which could have a range of studies and potentially useful variables (including but not limited to the Bruns et al. study and the IF variables) upon which country-level actors can draw. Most importantly, these tools would be introduced not as a set of variables with which to comply, but as a range of alternative practices from which to draw. Here technical tools do not drive the process of developing a credible education plan, which is an inherently political process and ideally should involve a range of stakeholders from government officials to teachers to civil society organizations. Instead, technical expertise serves to inform the dialogue and open up new ways of seeing things. In some of the most successful cases, the IF was used in a way that did just this. For example, in Ghana and Mozambique, the IF was cited as a useful tool because it helped these countries think through certain aspects of their policy design and monitoring system (Allsop et al, 2009; Bartholomew et al., 2009).

Some countries may request assistance in using these technical tools. Country-based technical assistance should be scaled up so that local education stakeholders benefit from early, frequent and long-term dialogue to develop the country-specific activities and measurements that make the most sense. One possible organization that could provide this type of technical support is UNESCO's Institute for Education Planning, given its deep institutional expertise in advising ministries of education.

Each country's education plan will be the result of a fundamental political process that will involve negotiation, compromise, hard-decisions and the balance of aspirations with feasibility. The funding proposal to the FTI will be based on this plan and the technical soundness of both documents should be verified by an independent panel of experts. The FTI does currently have an External Quality Review

panel⁶ which consists of about three experts who are called in to review individual proposals as necessary. This panel should evolve into a more robust mechanism, with a standing set of external and independent experts (including experts from developing countries and civil society), who are tasked with reviewing all proposals for the sake of consistency. The independent panel would review each country's proposal, rate its technical strength, and provide a recommendation for funding to the resource-allocation decision-makers (currently the FTI's Board of Directors).

Ultimately, providing technical guidance using this approach would allow countries to choose their own appropriate benchmarks that could be used to indicate adequate progress toward its education goals. Accountability would be derived from context-specific metrics, much in the way it is done in the GFATM. Each country funded under the GFATM develops a multi-year grant agreement with the Global Fund Secretariat that sets country-specific program targets based on metrics in its proposal. This allows the organization implementing the proposal in-country, which may or may not be the government, to request additional disbursements in years three to five based on demonstrated progress toward the program targets. A similar process utilized by FTI would enable an accountability framework that is linked specifically to each country's context, rather than a universalizing global framework such as the IF.

These suggestions provide an alternative country-based approach to ensuring existing good practice is leveraged in national education planning and to developing accountability metrics against which to measure progress and evaluate on-going fund disbursement. However, they do not provide the FTI with a common vision about core objectives and principles that applies across countries. In many ways, however erroneously, the IF did provide a concrete set of common values above and beyond the FTI's over-arching goal of helping every country with a credible plan to achieve EFA and specifically UPE.

There is nothing wrong with the FTI developing a core set of guiding principles that could inform its work and articulate in more detail what values within the effort to achieve UPE are especially important. Such principles would need to be quite broad and should be developed through a process of consultation between the donor and recipient countries that are part of the initiative. Some examples could include: priority focus should be on those with the greatest need (this could apply both to countries receiving FTI funding as well as how national education plans and FTI proposals treat the most marginalized); equity and equality should be maximized; and improvements in education quality should be central (this could include specific attention to learning outcomes in addition to other types of quality inputs). These principles are fundamentally different from a set of technical variables and benchmarks, such as those that make up the IF. Such principles could make explicit and common across countries any values that the FTI seeks to uphold throughout its work.

Recommendations

It is time the FTI develops new politically legitimate ways of allocating needed resources and ensuring accountability for results that puts developing countries at the center. This improved approach should seek to build upon the existing FTI procedures while employing good practices used by the GFATM. We suggest multiple approaches are needed to effectively fulfill the main functions to which the IF aspires to serve – namely, ensuring existing good practice informs the development of national plans, promoting accountability, and facilitating a common vision across countries. We make seven specific recommendations to the FTI board of directors, chair and secretariat to consider within their current effort to transform the initiative to a more effective aid mechanism.

1. Abandon the approach of developing global technical tools that are applied across all countries, including the Indicative Framework (along with any other similar technical frameworks such as the draft Needs and Performance Framework).
2. Recognize that developing national education plans and subsequent FTI proposals should be driven by a legitimate political process with country actors at the center and informed by technical tools and existing good practice rather than the other way around.
3. Develop a set of technical toolkits, that includes a range of studies, good practice examples and useful variables to consider (including but not limited to variables in the IF). Offer these tools as support for national education dialogue.
4. Provide scaled-up technical assistance to countries requesting support in the use of these technical toolkits that adequately supports country-level policy dialogue and decision-making.
5. Expand the current technical review panel to a standing set of independent experts that represent a broad constituency (including developing countries and civil society) tasked with evaluating all proposals on their technical soundness. Resource allocation decisions would then be made based upon the recommendations of this independent panel of experts.
6. Develop accountability systems based on country-specific performance metrics only.
7. Explore the desirability of developing a set of broad guiding principles that would provide a shared vision and inform the FTI's work across all countries.

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Endnotes

1. The FTI has received scrutiny very recently in its mid-term evaluation (Cambridge Education et al., 2009) and in a report on a Global Fund for Education (Oxfam, 2010). The scope of this brief is restricted to the indicative framework.
2. The language used by FTI has changed over time.
3. The final two indicators that address learning outcomes were adopted by the FTI in 2009 and therefore are not included in any of the country case studies in the mid-term evaluation or other literature on the Indicative Framework.
4. The Bruns et al. study, which was completed before the FTI's IF was invented, was quite critical of the uses to which the study's results might be put. The study said that using system-wide averages does not guarantee efficiency; that targets may not be optimal in a particular context; and that the level and mix of resources may not translate into a quality primary education (as reported in Cambridge Education, 2009).
5. The FTI has developed, but not yet used, a draft Needs and Performance Framework (NPF) that aims to include an emphasis on needs and performance in the Catalytic Fund's approach to allocations. However, in its current form, the NPF falls victim to many of the same critiques as the IF.
6. The External Quality Review mechanism is a desk-based review that assesses the fit between needs and demands, the rationale for requesting CF resources rather than more bilateral funds, the robustness of the funding gap equation, the contribution of the CF grant to aid effectiveness, and the soundness of the connection between the CF requests and education sector plans.

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