

International Push for SBMCs and the Problem of Isomorphic Mimicry: Evidence from Nigeria

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Abstract

Establishing School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs) is one of the most widely adopted and widely studied interventions aimed at addressing the learning crisis faced in many developing countries: giving parents and communities a certain degree of control over aspects of school management is assumed to increase school accountability and contribute to improvements in learning. Examining the case of Nigeria, which in 2005 adopted a national policy to establish SBMCs in state schools, this paper reviews the evidence available on SBMCs' ability to mobilise communities, and the potential for this increased community participation to translate into improved learning. The paper shows that while local community participation can help improve school performance, the donor and state supported SBMCs struggle to stay active and have positive impact on school performance. Yet for ministries of education in many developing countries establishing SBMCs remains a priority intervention among the many initiatives aimed at improving education quality. The paper thus asks what makes the establishment of SBMCs a priority intervention for the Nigerian government. By presenting an analysis of the SBMC-related policy documents in Nigeria, the paper demonstrates that an intervention aimed at involving local communities and developing bottom-up approaches to identifying and designing education policies is itself entirely a product of top-down policy making, envisioned, developed, and funded almost entirely by the international development community. The entire process is reflective of isomorphic mimicry—a process whereby organisations attempt to mimic good behaviour to gain legitimacy, instead of fixing real challenges. Adopting the policy to establish SBMCs, which is heavily promoted by the international development community and does not require actual reform of the underlying political-economy challenges hindering investment in education, enables education ministries to mimic commitment to education reforms and attain the endorsement of the international community without addressing the real challenges. Like all cases of isomorphic mimicry, such policy adoption and implementation has costs: national ministries, as well as state- and district-level education authorities, end up devoting time, resources, and energy to planning, designing, and implementing an intervention for which neither the need nor the evidence of success is established. Additionally, such top-down measures prevent state agencies from identifying local opportunities for delivering the same goals more effectively and perhaps at a lower cost. The paper illustrates this with the case of the state of Kano: there is a rich indigenous culture of supporting community schools, yet, rather than learning why local communities support certain kinds of school but not state schools, and trying to replicate the lessons in state schools, the SBMC model introduced is designed by development agencies at the national level and is administratively complicated and resource-intensive. The opportunity for local learning has not been realised; instead, both the agenda and the implementation framework have been entirely shaped by international aid agencies. The paper thus demonstrates how apparently positive policy interventions resulting from pressure exerted by the international community could be having unintended consequences, given the national-level political-economy dynamics.

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Introduction

Weak political will and limited state bureaucratic capacity to address the learning crisis in many developing countries have prompted the international development community to place much hope in community participation to improve service delivery (Sharma 2008; Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009; Westhorp et al. 2014). Linked closely to the idea of decentralisation, active community participation is argued to improve school performance, due to the increased accountability of state actors (Burns et al. 2011). School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs) are one of the most widely adopted reform measures under decentralisation-related education-sector reforms in developing countries: they are argued to act as a direct check on teachers and principals, to ensure regular student attendance, and to mobilise local resources for school support; in some contexts, SBMCs are even given authority to monitor school budgets (Patrinos et al. 2007; Westthorp et al. 2014). The actual evidence of SBMCs' success in mobilising the local community and improving learning outcomes, however, remains mixed (Corrales 2006; Altschuler 2013; Westthorp et al. 2014; Levy et al. 2018; Hickey and Hossain 2019). Yet establishing SBMCs in state schools remains a priority intervention for most ministries of education in developing countries. Reviewing the mixed evidence on the effectiveness of SBMCs in Nigeria, a country which has prioritised the establishment of SBMCs in state schools, this paper investigates the rationale for such a prioritisation, given the competing demands on the time and resources of the education bureaucracy.

The paper demonstrates that, even though the evidence in support of assumptions that SBMCs can improve learning outcomes in state schools in Nigeria remains weak, the SBMC policy has been adopted and promoted because it is endorsed by the international development community. Given the low educational outcomes (UNICEF 2020) and failure of the political elites to invest in human development (Falola and Heaton 2008; Omotola 2008), prioritising this policy, which is heavily donor-funded and puts no pressure on the underlying political-economy processes undermining investment in education, appears to help deflect attention from the state failure to implement more fundamental reforms. The analysis of the SBMC policy development and implementation process in Nigeria thus raises a more fundamental question: does the international development community do more good or more harm by promoting seemingly useful global interventions, when such a process requires governments to devote resources and time to initiatives which might not be the ones most needed – thereby diverting resources away from more essential reforms? Such international agenda setting in fact seems to promote isomorphic mimicry: a process whereby states can mimic commitment to reform of the education sector while avoiding undertaking the actual reforms that often require political elites to make radical decisions to reduce existing resource spending in favour of investment in education.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 1 presents the conceptual framework, detailing the rationale provided for promotion of SBMCs by international development agencies, and reviewing the evidence of their impact in existing studies. Section 2 presents the method. Section 3 presents the SBMC model adopted by Nigerian government. Section 4 reviews the evidence available on recent government- and donor-led efforts to establish SBMCs in state schools in Nigeria and their impact on mobilising community participation and improving learning outcomes. Section 5 traces the evolution and development of the entire government discourse on SBMCs in Nigeria, from their inception in the 1990s, to illustrate how the entire process has been completely donor-led. Section 6 documents the existence of a large number of community-supported schools in Kano which draw on community-based financial and material support and on volunteer teachers. Yet, rather than trying to understand what motivates communities to support these schools and then transferring that learning to state

schools, the SBMC model introduced in state schools, developed at the national level via technical experts provided by donor agencies, requires a more cost-heavy mechanism for community mobilisation without demonstrating tangible results in terms of improving school quality or learning outcomes.

Section 1. Community Participation and Improved Learning: The Assumptions and the Evidence

The emphasis on decentralisation and promoting grassroots and bottom-up approaches to enhance state accountability in development theory and practice has seen the introduction of many state- and donor-led community-based interventions within the education sector in the last twenty years (Sharma 2008; Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009; Westhorp et al. 2014). Among these measures, which include interventions such as the introduction of school score cards, community schools, and School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs) that allow for devolving decision-making powers and at times even budgetary control to the community level have been particularly popular (Westhorp et al. 2014). SBMCs can be of different types. Barrera-Osorio et al. (2009), for instance, argue for differentiating among various school-based management models on the basis of who has the power to make decisions, such as the school principals, teachers, or the community. They also note that devolving power to the school or community level can involve devolution of different functions such as budget allocations; hiring and firing of teachers and other school staff; curriculum development; procurement of textbooks and other educational materials; infrastructure improvement; and monitoring and evaluation of teacher performance and student learning outcomes (Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009). There is a recognition that school-based management initiatives can fall anywhere on the continuum of weak to strong: in the former, the community has only a weak monitoring role, while in the latter the community can potentially have the power to make key decisions about the operational, financial, and educational management of schools (Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009; Bruns et al. 2011). Evidence on the effectiveness of school-based management models in improving school performance or student learning outcomes, however, remains weak (Patrinos et al. 2007; Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009; Bruns et al. 2011). These studies also show that for school-based management to yield even a basic level of improvement in school performance, it is important that the SBMC members are given real authority, that the committee is adequately resourced, and that there is no elite capture of power and resources. Sharma (2008) in turn questions the validity of the underlying assumptions driving community-based initiatives. In particular, she questions the assumptions that community demand represents the interests of a homogeneous collective and that more transparent and responsive institutions will be most efficient.

While there is sufficient evidence that government- and donor-funded projects can mobilise communities to be part of SBMCs and in some cases can also lead to improved school inputs (Patrinos et al. 2007; Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009; Bruns et al. 2011; Levy 2018; Hickey and Hossain), these studies fail to establish the positive impact of active SBMCs on learning outcomes. A recent study in Pakistan, in fact, even records a negative impact of active school councils on learning outcomes (Asim 2019). Drawing on results from a randomised controlled trial, Asim (2019) tests whether active government encouragement to spend non-salary budget to improve school inputs would make members of school councils more active. The results show that schools where council members were actively encouraged to spend the budget did spend 40 per cent more funds in absolute terms. However, the increased expenditure did not translate into improved outcomes for the schools or students; students in these schools in fact demonstrated lower performance in Maths, English, and Urdu by approximately a tenth of a standard deviation than students in schools where council members were not similarly

encouraged. The plausible explanation for this is that, since in Pakistan government-funded teaching posts are often given as a reward of political patronage, the teachers and principals reacted to increased community accountability by doing even less work – thus leading to a further decline in performance (Asim 2019). Thus, if the planners are not sensitive to the local power dynamics, externally designed SBCM interventions, can in fact introduce negative incentives, leading actors to underperform.

As we shall see in Section 4, the findings from Nigeria are largely consistent with the evidence from other contexts: by making a school-improvement budget available to the SBMCs and investing in community mobilisation through NGOs and district-level education authorities, it is possible to have active SBMCs in state schools – but the lack of autonomy exercised by the SBMCs members and the nature of duties assigned to them fail to generate genuine community participation and reap the benefits associated with organic modes of community participation in form of innovation or sustainability. The evidence of impact by the SBMCs on actual learning outcomes in Nigeria is negligible, despite active investment made in them by international development agencies and the government; further, in most state schools the SBMCs remain dormant unless actively supported by a donor funded programme. It thus becomes important to ask: why does the policy of establishing SBMCs remain one of the key priorities for education authorities in Nigeria? In order to understand the broader political economy processes that make the policy of establishing SBMCs a government priority, it is particularly useful to engage with the concept of ‘isomorphic mimicry’ and understand how it is retarding the working of education ministries in the developing world (Pritchett 2013).

Focusing on identifying the causes of the learning crisis in the developing world, Pritchett (2013) in his book *Schooling Ain't Learning* notes that, since gaining independence, ministries of education in most developing countries came to mimic educational practices promoted by development community in order to gain legitimacy, while failing to address the real challenges to provision of quality education. He equates this behaviour to isomorphic mimicry— a concept developed by organisational theorists to highlight how organisations at times use camouflage to enhance their chances of survival. All organisations need to demonstrate their legitimacy and usefulness; the problem emerges when some organisations can try to gain legitimacy by attempting to copy the outer signs of successful organisations, instead of doing the real work. Pritchett (2013: 120) notes that some argue that even if such copying does no good, it does no harm either. But, as he goes on to argue, a placebo can be dangerous if it stops us from pursuing the correct diagnosis and a real cure. The investment in ‘EMIS-visible inputs’ in his view creates an illusion of progress which proves highly detrimental to improving the actual quality of education provision:

This illusion protects dysfunctional systems against creating the space for new innovations, against the freedom to experiment, and in particular against the disruptive innovations that ultimately can lead to rapid and sustained pace in improvements in learning.....

.....Organizations, particularly in fields in which the desired outcomes are complex to produce and hard to assess, can enhance their organizational survival by adopting “best practice” where it doesn’t really matter. Such reforms can make them *look* like functional organizations. Adopting the forms of best practice without any of the underlying functionality that actually characterizes the best practice can produce quick and easy gains in perception. Such organizations can look like successful organizations while lacking any real success.....

.....By pretending to adopt the pursuit of quality education through the expansion of EMIS-visible inputs, more training, and more formal qualifications, these systems are able to fend off challenges, resist innovations, and delay core reforms integral to improved learning. (Pritchett 2013: 120-121).

As we shall see in Section 5 and Section 6, the prioritisation of SBMC policy in Nigeria fits precisely this framework. Despite limited evidence of bottom-up demand for SBMCs or of improved learning outcomes when SBMCs are in place, the establishment of SBMCs remains a priority policy, due to its prioritisation by the international development community. Not only does it potentially result in waste of precious financial resources and bureaucratic energy that could be invested in other more urgent reforms needed to improve learning, such as teacher training, or more resources in schools, or provision of learning material and textbooks to children in a context where the majority cannot afford them (Pinnock 2012; ESSPIN 2017), it also takes away the pressure that the international development community could instead be putting on the national elites to address the fundamental political-economy challenges hindering serious investment in education.

Finally, isomorphic mimicry can also reduce responsiveness to local needs and opportunities. In Section 5, with reference to the state of Kano, we see how the education authorities in Nigeria continue to fail to learn from the local context and thus miss out on many opportunities to identify low-cost participatory solutions. The state of Kano has a large network of community-supported schools. Further, these schools have many features of what Pritchett (2013), drawing on *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* (Brafman and Beckstrom 2006), describes as 'starfish' education systems: locally operated, performance-pressured, professionally networked, technically supported, and financially supported. Historically, in all countries, schools presented a starfish system consisting of these features. Under colonial rule and in post-colonial contexts, as national education systems evolved, the starfish system was replaced by the 'spider' ecosystem: top-down bureaucracies that try to impose centralised control on the entire education system across all tiers of the government, tightly controlling decisions concerning which school to build, which teacher to assign to which school, and what subjects to teach. Such centralised systems often prove ineffective in fixing the actual hurdles to the provision of good-quality education.

As we shall see in Section 5, the community schools in Kano have many of the features of the starfish system, a fact which is key to their success. It is not necessary for the education authorities in Nigeria to absorb all these features of the local community schools. However, these schools have historically been successful in mobilising community support in the form of cash contributions, donations of land for school building, provision of food for children, and offers by community members to work as teachers or provide free labour to build school infrastructure. These schools thus offer good models of how to mobilise local communities, instead of the top-down imposition of SBMC models which have time and resource costs that cash-strapped states like Nigeria fail to provide on a sustainable basis: for example, non-salary school-development grants for SBMCs to implement their development agenda; the costs of engaging NGOs to mobilise the community; and the time and energy of the social mobilisation staff of the district education authorities (see section 3).

Section 2. Method

This paper employs a mixed-method approach, drawing on existing survey data available on SBMCs' performance in Nigeria, interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, and reviews of

government policy documents concerning SBMC development. In order to appreciate the rationale for adopting this mixed approach, it is important to explain the nature and quality of data available. The one benefit of the push towards promoting SBMCs in state schools in Nigeria, and the active donor support for this policy development and its implementation, has been that investment has been made in assessing the impact of the SBMC support interventions. A rare opportunity to obtain multi-year survey data on SBMCs' performance from across six states in Nigeria is offered by the Education Sector Support Programme (ESSPIN), an eight-year education- sector support programme funded by UKAID. ESSPIN implemented an integrated school-improvement programme across the states of Enugu, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Kwara, and Lagos (ESSPIN 2017). This integrated programme aimed to ensure that the participating school has an effective head teacher, competent teachers, a functional SBMC, school-based development planning, and inclusive practices. The impact of interventions made in each of these areas was measured by means of a composite survey, implemented in three stages: a 2012 round to establish baseline data (CS1); a 2014 round to assess the impact of interventions after two years (CS2); and a 2016 round to study the impact of interventions four years on (CS3) (Cameron 2015; Cameron et al. 2016). The survey included administration of English and maths tests to Year 2 and Year 4 students in the participating schools to measure impact of ESSPIN inputs on actual learning outcomes.

This composite survey consisted of a number of indicators aimed at measuring performance in each of the areas of school improvement, including the objective of establishing functional SBMCs. The three rounds of survey present a unique opportunity to compare performance over time. Initially an effort was made to maintain a control group of state schools in each state and an intervention group; but, depending on the rate of success of the ESSPIN interventions in each state, many of the schools within the control group had also received interventions by the time CS2 or CS3 were implemented (Cameron et al. 2016). Due to the difficulty of maintaining the control group in such circumstances, the subsequent survey rounds thus differentiate schools according to the duration and intensity of interventions. The most useful results from the perspective of this paper are those focused on tracing change over time, rather than across the different school categories. In CS3, 735 schools out of 10,000 schools receiving ESSPIN support across the six states were covered (Cameron et al. 2016). It is also important to note that, though also funded by UKAID, the composite surveys were conducted by an independent group and not by ESSPIN itself, thereby ensuring the integrity of the survey exercise (Cameron 2015; Cameron et al. 2016).

Assessing the impact of ESSPIN support to SBMCs in the six states is particularly useful, given that the ESSPIN model has been adopted by the Nigerian government at the national level (GoN 2015). Also, the six states covered by ESSPIN offer a good representation of socio-economic and cultural variations in Nigeria. Thus, the results shared are based on the model adopted by the federal government in Nigeria; they capture variation across six important states in Nigeria; and they are based on the experience of the six states where the established SBMCs received maximum support (see section 4). If the results show limited impacts of SBMCs on school improvement and learning outcomes in line with the global evidence, then it becomes legitimate to question the political-economy processes leading to prioritisation of the SBMC policy.

The composite survey included a number of indicators to assess if the SBMCs being established under the ESSPIN model were 'functional': for example, holding regular meetings; working with the community, community-based organisations (CBOs), and traditional or religious institutions; raising awareness; and addressing exclusion. The SBMCs were also required to

have an active women's committee and a children's committee, and to keep financial records; and the chairperson is expected to make frequent visits to the school. The composite survey required evidence to be presented for the dimensions surveyed (see Box 1), instead of merely accepting the word of the respondent (usually the SBMC chairperson) (Cameron et al. 2016).

Box 1. Indicators for Measuring SBMC Functionality

For an SBMC to be considered functional, the CS required that it met at least five of the nine criteria:

- 1) Two or more SBMC meetings have taken place since the start of the school year (written evidence)
- 2) SBMC conducted awareness-raising activities (written or oral evidence)
- 3) SBMC took steps to address exclusion (written or oral evidence)
- 4) SBMC networked with CBOs, traditional or religious institutions, or other SBMCs (written or physical evidence)
- 5) SBMC interacted with local government education authorities on education service-delivery issues (written or physical evidence)
- 6) SBMC women's committee exists (written or physical evidence)
- 7) SBMC children's committee exists (written or physical evidence)
- 8) SBMC contributed resources for the school (written or physical evidence);
- 9) SBMC chair has visited the school at least three times since the start of the school year (written evidence).

Source: Cameron et al. (2016).

While results from the composite survey help us to study the ability of the state and donor agencies to establish functional SBMCs and to assess their impact on learning outcomes, the availability of an in-depth ethnographic study on the working of ESSPIN-supported SBMCs in the state of Kwara, allowing for rural and urban variation, helps us to appreciate how building community participation through SBMCs using such top-down models incurs costs in terms of time and finance, and how such state- and donor-induced community platforms are inherently incapable of making any demands on the state actors that can fix the real political-economy challenges hindering the provision of good-quality education (Pagarani 2012). The biggest achievements such SBMC models can demonstrate are occasional successes in getting a low-performing teacher transferred, mobilisation of resources for school infrastructure improvement, and ensuring more regular student attendance. The ethnographic study further shows that establishment of active SBMCs does not mean prioritisation of what the community expects from education; instead this model involves the state telling the communities what to do, and how to take more responsibility for ensuring functional schools.

In order to understand why, despite limited evidence of positive impacts on learning, and despite the investment of the time and resources required to establish functioning SBMCs, the Nigerian government has prioritised the policy of establishing SBMCs, the above analysis of the working and performance of the SBMCs is complemented by a systematic review of government policy documents to understand the factors driving the development of National School-Based Management Policy by the federal government. This review helps us to map the objectives of the policy and the actual design of the implementation framework, and it identifies the actors whose inputs have made SBMC establishment a priority education policy in Nigeria. The result of this analysis demonstrates the heavily top-down nature of the evolution and development of a policy that in principle is aimed at promoting bottom-up approaches to development.

Finally, the paper also draws on fieldwork with Islamic and Quranic schools in the state of Kano to establish how these schools have in the past been deeply embedded in the community and how they draw on active community support without having to establish SBMCs. Interviews were conducted with the principals of Islamic and Quranic schools, community members, and staff employed by the Local Government Education Authority (LGEA) to map the extensive network of Islamic and Quranic schools and to establish the multiple ways in which they draw on community support. Group discussions were also held with the community members including traditional elders to understand how engaged the community is with the issues of education provision. There was a particular focus on understanding the working of Islamiyya schools, which are not traditional Islamic or Quranic schools that focus mainly on Islamic education. Islamiyya schools instead offer a hybrid model of education which combines regular state primary and secondary curricula with the teaching of Islamic subjects. The children from these schools are awarded standard primary- or secondary-school certificates. These schools are thus like state schools, yet they are strongly embedded in their local communities. Learning how Islamiyya schools win community support might lead to more cost-effective ways to mobilise community support for state schools, instead of introducing SBMCs, which have considerable cost implications, as outlined in the next section. Also, since Islamiyya schools feature prominently in the list of top-performing schools in Kano (Bano 2009), their mode of community engagement is arguably more effective than that promoted through the SBMC model. Yet over-reliance on models promoted by donor agencies contributes to state apathy and a reluctance to learn from good local practices.

The fieldwork with the community was conducted under the Oxford University ethics protocol, under which this study has been approved. Informed consent, whereby the respondents are fully informed of the objective of the study and given a choice whether or not to participate, and the anonymity of respondents are the core principles guiding this research. Interviews and group discussions were conducted in Hausa and then translated into English. In terms of data protection, as per Oxford University data-protection policy, the interview transcripts and diary notes were saved on the computer with an encrypted password. Also, as per the Oxford University ethics protocol, all respondents were promised anonymity unless they themselves expressed a desire to be quoted.

Section 3. National SBMC Policy in Nigeria: The Model and Its Costs

The Nigerian SBMC model, as developed by ESSPIN and adopted by the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), aims to create, train, and mentor SBMCs in state schools (GoN 2015). This requires the government education authorities to mobilise community members to join SBMCs; to build awareness among SBMCs' members about their roles and responsibilities; and to provide training to SBMCs on a number of issues, including record keeping, community mobilisation, and lobbying. In addition, the Nigerian SBMC model, as developed by ESSPIN, also has a strong focus on ensuring the representation of voices of groups perceived to be marginalised. SBMCs are required to have women's and children's committees which can contribute to the SBMC decision making; the model also has a special focus on 'inclusion', with a particular focus on children with special needs (GoN 2015; ESSPIN 2016b; Enugu n.d.). Thus, the targets set for the SBMCs extend beyond improving learning: giving voice to women and children and ensuring inclusion of marginalised groups are among the core objectives of the SBMCs (ESSPIN 2016a)¹. The policy is to be adjusted

¹ There is an implicit assumption that involving these groups will lead to improved education outcomes. But, as is the case for most studies noting positive impact of SBMCs' on school

and adapted to the needs of each state. The SBMC is to comprise between 8 and 20 members, ensuring representation of the core constituencies to be identified at state level (GoN 2015). In ESSPIN-supported states, SBMCs generally consisted of between eleven and fifteen members (Enugu n.d.). For instance, in the state of Enugu, the SBMC structure was composed of the following interest groups: one representative of the traditional council, the school principal, a male teacher and a female teacher, the school head girl and head boy as representatives of the pupils, one representative of the women’s group, two representatives from the parent–teacher committee, one representative of the artisan community, two representatives of young people, and one representative of civil-society organisations (Enugu n.d.).

This model of SBMC development demands visible commitments of resources and time by the education bureaucrats and field staff. Initially ESSPIN bore the financial costs. To provide a sense of the investment required to establish these SBMCs, some of the core steps followed by ESSPIN are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Core Stages in Implementing the ESSPIN SBMC Model

Stages	Actions
1	<p><i>SBMC visioning at state level and community development</i></p> <p>To adapt national SBMC guidelines to suit the state context, state governments are advised to engage a wide range of stakeholders in a three-phase consultation (visioning) process, culminating in the production of state-specific policy documents on SBMCs. State-level and community-level visioning are conducted to articulate the characteristics of school-based management.</p>
2	<p><i>State task teams</i></p> <p>As the basis of a broad platform of school improvement, early in the programme ESSPIN helped states to form and train state task teams (STTs) of officers from within the Ministry of Education and its agencies. These teams have an oversight, monitoring, and advocacy role at state level. They liaise between policy actors (senior managers for the State Ministry of Education and the State Universal Basic Education Board), the implementers of the SBMC concept (Department of Social Mobilisation staff), the SBMCs (school–community representatives), and the wider community where the school is situated. The STTs also have responsibility for securing resources through the Medium-Term Sector Strategy and budgeting processes to scale up the intervention at state level.</p>
3	<p><i>SBMC training and mentoring</i></p> <p>Civil society organisations are engaged to work with these government agencies to conduct a process of ‘community entry’ and sensitisation, including gender awareness and child awareness. Following the training of trainers, these civil society organisations and government field staff forms and trains SBMCs. The training covers SBMC roles and responsibilities, partnership and inclusion, communication, managing meetings, school development planning, and financial management. These civil society organisations and government field staff is to get ongoing training to do subsequent mentoring and support visits to SBMCs over a 12-month period. Based on the SBMC guidebook, this ongoing mentoring role includes reinforcement of SBMC training, child protection and</p>

improvement and learning outcomes, the evidence is either missing or the claim is based on methodologically weak tools (Westthorp et al. 2014).

	participation, resource mobilisation, inclusive education and gender, communications, advocacy, and relationship and change management.
4	<i>Local Government Education Authority— Community Response Forums</i> At local government level, forums are supported to bring together traditional and religious community leaders with government officials and local education councillors to build support for the SBMCs.
5	<i>Support to the Department of Social Mobilisation</i> Community engagement and learner participation fall under the SUBEB Department of Social Mobilisation (DSM) mandate. ESSPIN worked closely with DSM desk officers, and also assists them to build their own capacity.

Source: ESSPIN (2014).

Further, the ESSPIN also provided School Development Grants to SBMCs to support the School Development Planning (SDP) processes (Pinnock 2012). The model also involves paying Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to work with the government social mobilisation staff to mobilise the community to join SBMCs.

Thus, the model requires serious investment at the initial stage of community mobilisation and training, and ongoing commitment of funds to keep CSOs engaged to oversee the working of the SBMCs and for conducting ongoing training, as well as the investment of the time of the district- and state-level education authorities. What is the evidence of the impact on learning outcomes made by this investment in establishing SBMCs?

Section 4. SBMCs, Community Participation, and Learning Outcomes: Evidence from Nigeria

The evidence from the composite surveys across the six ESSPIN states, as well as the ethnographic study of ESSPIN-supported SBMCs in Kwara state, shows that it is difficult to argue that the national policy to establish SBMCs is based on evidence of positive impact on either the learning outcomes or the community’s ability to exert pressure on the state to improve the quality of education provision in state schools. Instead, if critically viewed, time and resources are being invested by the state and donor agencies to create a community platform whose existence allows the government to tick the box of community participation while in reality the members elected to this platform are explicitly told to remain ‘non-political’ (Enugu n.d.: 19). Further, they are taught to make demands which often are not the priority for the community, such as the appointment of women’s representatives, and the inclusion of disabled children— non-ESSPIN supported SBMCs continued to record low participation of these groups in the six states (Cameron 2014). SBMCs are told to do specific things, such as mobilise resources, and monitor teacher attendance, instead of actually acting as a platform to represent community preferences. Instead, the common guiding assumption is that the community does not value education (UBEC 2011). Real challenges that the state needs to fix, such as political appointment of teachers, low budgetary commitments to education, and frequent failures to release even the allocated education budget (ESSPIN 2017)— issues of which the community is acutely aware, as we shall see in Section 6— do not feature in the debates within the SBMC meetings.

4.1 Evidence from Composite Surveys: Active but Not Leading to Improvement in Learning

The results from the 2016 composite survey of schools across the six ESSPIN states show that SBMCs can become active on a range of issues in a short space of time if the requisite

investment is made in community mobilisation, training, and support, but it is difficult to establish the impact of active SBMCs on improved learning (Cameron 2015; Cameron et al. 2016). The 2016 composite survey data from across the six ESSPIN states show that SBMCs which received ESSPIN support had become much more functional since the 2012 or 2014 survey rounds (as measured against the nine criteria listed in Box 1 above), and they also met the criteria for ensuring active participation of women and children. The majority had also conducted awareness-raising activities to promote the value of education within the community, and had raised the issue of children's exclusion with the Local Government Education Authority (LGEA). Many SBMCs were also playing an active role in monitoring teachers' attendance, mobilising children to attend schools, and mobilising resources from within the community. The survey results do show state-level variations in the functioning of SBMCs. The most functional SBMCs in 2016 were found in Kwara and Lagos. But across the six states the schools that had received more years of intervention were found to have better functioning SBMCs. This did help to confirm that the ESSPIN model can help to establish a functioning SBMC. This result is consistent with the findings from other countries, which show that donor- and government-supported programmes can establish SBMCs which are active according to the criteria set by the planners (Westhorp et al. 2014). However, the 2016 CS results also show that these functional SBMCs had no visible impact on learning outcomes: in the ESSPIN-supported schools Year 4 students recorded a marginal improvement in numeracy scores but none in English, and the improvement in numeracy scores was statistically not significant; Year 2 students showed no improvement in either English or numeracy scores (Cameron et al. 2016). Further, a number of ESSPIN studies reviewing the implementation and impact of the SBMCs over the eight year period, acknowledge a number of more fundamental systematic challenges within the education system that they argued limited SBMCs' ability to make any positive impact on learning (Poulsen 2009; Pinnock 2012; Usman 2016; ESSPIN 2017):

- The very poor state of infrastructure in most state schools.
- Chronic shortages of basic resources for teaching and learning (textbooks).
- Head teachers who are not recruited on the basis of leadership and management skills and so may have limited capacity to benefit from training in these areas.
- Limited capacity of the existing teachers to benefit from training and support so that they can deliver on the attainment of basic skills in literacy and numeracy.
- Low levels of teacher motivation to improve performance, even when support is provided.
- Erratic budget execution which can leave teachers without salaries for as long as four months.
- Community members' concerns that increased funding by communities could undermine the government's commitment to spending on schools.
- Reluctance of teachers and head teachers to work with SBMCs.
- Expectation from SBMC members of remuneration for their participation.
- The extent to which SBMCs are representative of the broader community.

It is important to bear in mind that the CS3 survey results or ESSPIN's own recognition of the above challenges do not show a failure of ESSPIN to meet its targets; as the CS3 shows, ESSPIN was successful in meeting its target of establishing functional SBMCs, and the criteria for being functional were very much in line with what the usual donor-supported SBMC programmes require: active members, evidence of routine meetings, and some evidence of involvement in schools. The purpose of reviewing this evidence is not to assess ESSPIN's

performance, but to ask why, despite this limited evidence of SBMCs' impact on learning outcomes even when they are given major support by state and donor agencies, Nigeria has adopted a national policy to establish SBMCs. The salience of this question becomes even more clear when we see the results from a more ethnographic study looking at the actual power dynamics between the donor, government staff, CSOs, and the community.

4.2. Ethnographic Evidence: Telling Rather than Listening

While the survey results record weak evidence of impact of SBMCs on actual learning outcomes, ethnographic fieldwork with one very active SBMC and one failing one located in an urban and a rural LGA in the state of Kwara shows how SBMCs become a platform for transmitting state demands to the community, rather than providing a platform for the community to actually voice its demands to the state actors (Pagarani 2012). Drawing on fieldwork with SBMC members, general community members, CSOs, ESSPIN staff, social mobilisation officers at the LGEAs, and the head of the Department for Social Mobilisation (DSM) of the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), this ethnographic study aimed to understand what community representation really means in the Nigerian SBMC model. While the theoretical assumptions guiding donors' support for community participatory models posit that increased community participation will make state actors more accountable, the reality is that such interventions are often explicitly non-political. Thus, even the publications by ESSPIN made it very clear that SBMCs are 'non-political' and 'provide a way of helping the education authorities to listen to what adults and children want from school, and a way of increasing the contributions of everyone in the local area to making education work well' (Enugu n.d.: 14). Given such a focus, it is not surprising when SBMCs fail to make major demands on the state to improve education quality, but what the ethnographic study maps in particularly useful detail is how in practice the stated commitment to be listening to what the community wants is replaced by dictating to the community what to expect and what to contribute.

As the study shows, ESSPIN, the CSOs engaged to mobilise the community, and the Social Mobilization Officers (SMOs) from the district government authorities trained the SBMC members in what to ask and what to do. CSOs and SMOs are required to mould the community preferences through 'sensitisation' meetings. Although these meetings are meant to heed community voices, the starting assumption is that the community does not value education and that local people have to be convinced of the need to invest in their children's education (UBEC 2011). Further, related assumptions are that the community has to be taught about higher moral standards such as gender equality, rights of the child, and the need for inclusion of disadvantaged individuals such as disabled children. The study draws on responses from staff of the CSOs and the SBMs to capture this mind-set by recording some of the following responses (Pagarani 2012: 46) 'Success with SBMCs is about changing the mind-set of parents, especially in remote communities that don't value education due to their poverty..'; 'We go to the community to sensitise them. We do a lot of advocacy to enlighten them on what to do and what their children are supposed to be doing.'

The study also notes the challenge posed when the training provided focuses only on highlighting duties of the SBMC members and communities, rather than focusing on their rights. It notes that no SBMC member mentioned holding the state to account when asked about their training or about the purpose of the SBMC; almost all members mentioned monitoring of schools and teachers, but none mentioned anything about making demands on government or holding government to account. As part of the 'sensitisation' process, SBMCs are encouraged to take ownership of their schools; as noted by a staff member of the State Universal Basic

Education Board (SUBEB), the main body responsible for primary education at state level, quoted in the study (Pagarani 2012: 50):

You see the importance of the establishment of the SBMC is that we want the community to take over the school, to see schools as their own. We want to disabuse their mind of the mentality of saying that it is government's property. That is the idea we want to wrestle out of the mind of the people. We can only do this through sensitisation, through advocacy, through mobilisation, so once we are able to get their minds through these tactics, then as far as I'm concerned by now the awareness is there for everybody. The awareness is already created in the community that this is our school, it is not the government's school so let's do all we can to give the necessary support.

The study also documents how the existence of a donor agency is key to asserting the little bit of power that the SBMC members did exercise. It records how the CSO representatives noted that any power the SBMCs had to hold government to account depended largely on the presence of ESSPIN to put pressure on the government. It also notes the challenge to sustainability of these SBMCs once the donor support is over, as the training and support visits are paid for by the donor, as are the school development grants. When entirely left to the government, such support was not expected to continue. The study also raised the question of whether a focus on ideas such as inclusive education will ever be meaningfully adopted by the government or community in a context where even basic education provision suffers from real resource constraints.

The composite survey and the more in-depth ethnographic study show that the findings from Nigeria are similar to those from other contexts: donors and governments can establish functional SBMCs, but there is limited evidence of these platforms leading to improvements in learning outcomes (Westthrop et al. 2014)— even the more recent studies recording positive impact of SBMCs note improvement in school infrastructure or student or teacher attendance not in actual learning outcomes (Levy et al. 2018; Hickey and Hossain 2019). Further, these SBMCs are non-political by definition and thus are required not to make any politically contentious demands on the state actors. With the largest number of out-of-school children, the education challenges faced by the Nigerian government are huge. Learning outcomes are worsening over time: recent surveys show that literacy achievement levels are overall very low and declining nationally when compared with the results of past surveys from 2004 and 2010 (ESSPIN 2017). The national and state governments routinely fail to release the approved budgets, which already are much lower than the actual need. Teachers often have very low capacity, due to the poor quality of pre-service training, and they fail to translate training into improved performance. Teachers thus have low subject knowledge and use poor pedagogical practices. There are serious teacher shortages, and political appointment of teachers remains a major challenge to improving quality. Most schools have very poor infrastructure, with children often having to sit on the floor of crowded classrooms, and most children have no access to appropriate textbooks, age-appropriate literature, writing materials, and other learning resources. Above all, state budgets remain unpredictable, so that at times the release of teachers' salaries is delayed for many months (ESSPIN 2017). In such a context, why is the establishment of SBMCs in state schools a national priority, given the weak evidence of their actual contribution to improving learning outcomes in state schools or increasing communities' ability to hold the state accountable? Further, who has the right to decide whether ensuring women's participation, children's right to be heard, and inclusion of minorities, such as disabled children, should be a priority for SBMCs in contexts of such basic education deprivation where

the community might have a reason for prioritising good-quality education for ordinary children, irrespective of whether women's voices are included or disabled children's needs are catered for? In Section 6, we shall return to this issue by comparing what the community itself prioritises when its demands are not prompted by the state or donor agencies. But before moving on to that, it is important to finally address the evidence about the processes and actors that have made the establishment of SBMCs a high-priority national policy.

Section 5. SBMC Development in Nigeria: Entirely a Donor Construct

A close study of the National School-Based Management Policy (NSBMP) document published by the Federal Ministry of Education with support from ESSPIN provides important insights into the political-economy processes shaping the government education agenda in Nigeria. It helps to identify the voices that the government listens to when prioritising interventions, as well as the degree of control that it maintains over the actual design of the intervention. Tracing the history of the SBMC development in Nigeria before stating the national policy guidelines on SBMCs, the document notes that the roots of the SBMC system in Nigeria go back to the colonial period, when school management committees were first established to manage and raise funds for schools. The document notes that these committees became largely inactive when the government took over most schools in the 1980s. The current focus on SBMCs, it explicitly states, is credited to the 'global reform of education of the 1990s and 2000s' (GoN 2015: 2), which 'provided the impetus for the Nigerian Government to institutionalise the SBM system' (GoN 2015: 2). In 2005, under the influence of the international development agencies, at its 52nd Meeting the National Council on Education (NCE) directed that all schools should establish SBMCs in order to make local communities participate in the school decision-making process. The document further explains that at this stage the Federal Ministry of Education, through the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), issued guidelines to all State Universal Basic Education Authorities on how to establish SBMCs in their schools; and in 2007 the government made the establishment of SBMCs mandatory, although only a few schools managed to establish functional SBMCs. The document notes that the exceptions were the SBMCs that received support from donor agencies and organisations. The main problems with the guidelines issued in 2007 by UBEC are noted as follows (GoN 2015: 2-3):

- (i) it did not take cognisance of the diversity of the country and the peculiarities of the different States. It was a one-size-fit all directives;
- (ii) no provision was made for the mandatory training that should be provided for stakeholders in the SBM system;
- (iii) it did not identify the funding mechanism for school improvement within the SBM system;
- (iv) there were no monitoring and mentoring systems in place (for documenting evidence-based learning);
- (v) the decentralisation process was not clearly stated nor effectively pursued; and,
- (vi) the mechanism for participation of women and children in school level decision-making was virtually absent.

The National Policy document further notes how, in recognition of these problems, UBEC adopted the 'Process Approach' and published its 'Revised Guidelines for the Development of School-Based Management Committees' and 'Developing School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs) Trainers' Manual' in 2011. At the same time the National Policy was finalised.

A review of these documents shows that all three of them, including the national policy document, are actually drafted and printed by ESSPIN, with the UKAID support; the logos of the latter two feature prominently on these publications, along with the Ministry of Education logo. Further, the national policy document itself acknowledges how across all these stages identified from the early 2000s the process has been led by one development agency or another. ESSPIN is the most recent development programme to have supported the state on this and it made a decisive contribution to the adoption of the national policy and shaping the actual design of the SBMC model. But, as the policy documents make clear, it was not the first. An extract from National SBMC Policy document is illuminative:

Various organisations contributed to the development of the SBM system in Nigeria. These include: (i) Action Aid Nigeria (AAN), which introduced its model School Management Committees (SMCs) in April 2004 in 28 SBMCs in Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara States under its “Enhancing Girls’ Basic Education in Northern Nigeria (EGBENN)” project; (ii) The Civil Society Action Coalition on Education for All (CSACEFA) published its SBMC training Tool Kit in 2006. The training Kit was designed as a series of activities aimed at increasing women’s participation and representation in local governance through the activities of SBMCs; (iii) National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA), in conjunction with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Federal Ministry of Education (FME), developed an 8-volume Training Module for training SBMCs; (iv) Federal Ministry of Education (FME) in 2008 organized training of trainers (TOT) workshops for SBMCs in 20 States with higher gender disparity; (v) UK Department for International Development (DFID)-funded Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria (ESSPIN) piloted a “Process Approach” to SBM development in five States in Nigeria based on existing national policy guidelines and lessons learned from the literature and the SBM support programmes mentioned above. (GoN 2015: 3).

An early ESSPIN report records the process as such (ESSPIN 2014: 3): ‘In 2005, the Nigerian National Council for Education (NCE) approved the establishment of SBMCs in all schools and the Federal Ministry of Education issued guidelines for this. However, few SBMCs became fully functional. ESSPIN is working with relevant government and civil society structures to adapt and implement the national guidelines in the six states. At the state and federal level there is now interest in replicating the SBMC model developed in the ESSPIN-supported states.’ By 2011, UBEC had formally adopted the ESSPIN model, and that is what had led to the production of the national policy document and the SBMC establishment guidelines.

Further review of the national policy document, including the stated objectives of the policy, the SBMC design, and the prescribed processes for each state to establish the SBMC, reflects the strong influence of ESSPIN on all of these dimensions. The explicit focus on exclusive education in the main mission statement of the policy— ‘To establish an enabling environment for effective Government-Community-Civil Society partnership in Nigerian schools to deliver quality and inclusive education’— confirms strong ESSPIN influence, given that inclusion was one of the key themes prioritised by ESSPIN in its integrated school-improvement programme and its SBMC design. The stages through which states should proceed to adapt these national policy guidelines to the local state context similarly reflect the stages adopted by ESSPIN as outlined in Table 2.

The national policy document also makes many other explicit references to confirm how the government decision to prioritise the establishment of SBMCs is a response to the global consensus and advice of the international development agencies:

Decentralisation of education governance does work. According to the 2015 EFA Global Monitoring Report, decentralisation initiatives that have taken place between 2000 and 2015 in a number of sub-Saharan African countries have contributed to increased equitable access to education, improved school completion and education quality, as well as promoted gender equality in education. Studies and evidence show that recent SBM reforms and its impact on decentralisation of school governance in Nigeria is making appreciable contributions to improving access, equity and learning outcomes in public schools. This National SBM Policy is intended to properly harness, coordinate and strengthen efforts in this direction. (GoN 2015: 4).

As analysed in Section 4, the evidence to support the assertion that SBMCs are leading to improved ‘access, equity and learning’ is weak; on the aspect of improvement in learning, the evidence is almost non-existent. Yet the national policy document is willing to use very weak evidence to assert the benefit of establishing SBMCs. In fact, as can be assessed even from the above extract, the focus is primarily on justifying global evidence and consensus building within the development community as the main rationale for this investment in SBMCs. The fact that the government prioritised SBMC policy is evident not only in how much the government advertised this policy, and how it encouraged its adoption among states (GoN 2015; ESSPIN 2020): it is also the main component of the ESSPIN-supported whole-school development programme, for whose expansion UBEC committed visible funds: after adopting the ESSPIN’s SBMC model in 2012, UBEC invested 705 million Naira to roll out the approach across 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (ESSPIN 2016: 8). Other arguably more critical aspects of the programme, with closer links to improving learning such as teacher and school principal training, failed to draw required financial commitments from UBEC.

The question therefore is why did SBMC establishment become such a priority, given that the state schooling sector in Nigeria is fraught with far more fundamental challenges to improving the quality of education provision? Such challenges include, among others, the lack of teaching materials, the poor quality of teacher training, inadequate funds for basic school facilities, and at times months of delays in the payment of teachers’ salaries to list a few (ESSPIN 2017). It is here that the concept of isomorphic mimicry becomes a very powerful analytical tool. If we look at the level of investment required to address these fundamental challenges to the education sector, it is clear that there needs to be a major shift in priorities of the national political elites in favour of investment in education and ensuring that the education bureaucracy works efficiently to fix the technical constraints impeding the provision of good-quality education.

When the political elites lack the will to invest in pro-poor reform leading to neglect of basic services, including provision of quality education, it is much easier for the state to try to gain some international legitimacy by engaging with a policy that requires little from it but can help it to mimic a commitment to reform. Such a concern becomes particularly significant in developing countries like Nigeria, where it is not necessarily the lack of resources (given the country’s oil wealth) but its poor governance structure and rentier state model that is seen to cause the low-economic growth and poor investment in human development (Lewis 1994; Falola and Heaton 2008; Omotola 2008; Ojukwu et al. 2010; Vaughan 2016). Adoption of SBMC-establishment policies is one of those low-cost investments for the ministries of

education in countries like Nigeria, where challenges to the provision of quality education remain great, and the state's commitment to reform is weak. In particular this policy requires little from the state, as in most cases the donors bear the cost of financing consultations to develop the policy documents, pay for the consultants to design the SBMC model, and fund the establishment of SBMCs in the initial years. On the other hand, unlike teacher training or provision of textbooks, or improved examination systems, where the state is required to make major financial commitments and/or to have sufficient technical and administrative capacity, the establishment of SBMCs helps to transfer some of the pressure on to the community, instead of the state itself having to do much. Thus, adopting this policy becomes the easiest way to win endorsement of the international community and mimic commitment to education reform while not making the due effort to meet the real political-economy challenges hindering proper investment in education. Since the international community and donors are also keen to claim successful returns on the money that they spent, they are often pleased to record evidence of some influence, in whichever area that proves possible. In the process, what gets ignored is that by promoting certain interventions as universal good practice, the international community might actually be retarding the process of real reform in many countries. The assumption that certain interventions are good for all contexts creates incentives for states that lack political commitment to reform to prioritise the least costly interventions from the global agenda. This helps these states to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the international development community without making any genuine attempt at reform. The consequence is that real high-priority needs are side-lined.

Section 6. Learning Lessons from the Ground: Evidence from Kano

While the previous section has argued that prioritisation of less useful interventions in contexts of dire scarcity of resources causes harm by diverting the education authorities' attention, resources, and time away from undertaking the reforms that are really needed, this section will demonstrate how a top-down and outward-looking rather than inward-looking policy-formation process also leads to neglect of learning opportunities in the local context. In the case of SBMCs, this loss of opportunity arises from the failure of the government education authorities in Nigeria to learn from community-supported schooling networks in many states in Nigeria. The best example of such community support for education comes from the state of Kano, the most populous and politically influential northern Nigerian state. This state hosts a large network of Islamic and Quranic schools that have historically been supported by local communities (CUBE 2008). The origin of these schools goes back five centuries to the establishment of the first Muslim communities in the region. Historically, these schools offered the traditional Islamic education as well as preparing students for worldly success. Graduates from these schools took up official posts in the royal courts, got involved in economic transactions, and served as judges and administrators. As the British established control over northern Nigeria from the start of the twentieth century, these Islamic and Quranic schools gradually came to focus exclusively on Islamic education, as the British established a Western-style schooling system in the region, linking formal employment prospects to the acquisition of degrees from state schools (Bano 2018). Apart from having a focus on different subjects, the two school systems had very different ecosystems. The Islamic and Quranic schools were always community-supported and operated as a starfish ecosystem: they were independent though professionally networked, had pressure from the state and community to perform, and provided knowledge that was locally relevant. The state schooling system, on the other hand, operated as a spider system, with central control and command leading to the challenges associated with such a system, outlined in Section 1.

Despite the gradual marginalisation of the Islamic and Quranic system, due to the state's failure to recognise its degrees, and due also to the severance of its links to the formal employment market, the Islamic and Quranic schooling network still thrives throughout northern Nigeria. There are 23,000 Islamic and Quranic schools in Kano alone, as opposed to only 6,000 state-run primary and secondary schools (CUBE 2008). These schools still operate as a starfish ecosystem. More relevant for our analysis here, these schools survive even today by drawing on active local support, mobilising communities to provide financial contributions, to donate land for school building, and to provide food for children enrolled in these schools; moreover, individuals from within the community act as volunteer teachers in these schools, or work for a fraction of the salary of the government-employed school teachers (Bano 2009). It is fair to assume that some of this community support for these schools stems from their focus on imparting Islamic education, which could provide religious incentives for the community to support them. However, this does not mean that the state schools cannot learn from these schools in terms of how to win community support, for two important reasons.

First, Islam does not make a distinction between Islamic and modern education; historically Islamic and Quranic schools covered all subjects, and it was only in the colonial period that education became divided between Islamic and modern schools (Bano 2018). Thus, if properly identified, the religious discourse or incentives that prompt the community to support Islamic and Quranic schools can equally be applicable to extending support to state schools, given that all forms of knowledge acquisition are encouraged in Islam. Second, within the Islamic and Quranic schooling network in Kano and across northern Nigeria, a new category of schools emerged in the 1960s, which today are referred to as Islamiyya schools (Bano 2018). These schools combine Islamic and modern curricula, i.e. the curricula taught in traditional Islamic and Quranic schools and in the state schools. Today, they are in fact the most popular schooling model within the community in Kano: a study mapping the 21 most popular state and Islamic secondary schools in Kano shows that nine of them are Islamiyya schools (Bano 2009). Like the Islamic and Quranic schools, Islamiyya schools also draw on the active support of the community through cash donations, provision of land, and volunteer teachers or teachers willing to work for very low salaries in response to religious incentives. The fact that, despite being equally focused on the teaching of modern subjects as taught in state schools, Islamiyya schools are able to draw on active community contributions supports the earlier contention that community support for education is not restricted to the study of Islamic subjects. In such a context, arguably the local education authorities can develop much more cost-effective and efficient platforms for mobilising communities to support state schools by learning from the example of Islamic and Quranic schooling networks, instead of investing in SBMC models from the top, which have limited evidence of impact and are comparatively cost-intensive—costs that the state governments are unlikely to sustain beyond the donor supported period.

Further, discussions with members of the community in Kano challenge two key assumptions underlying the SBMC model: first, that rural communities do not appreciate the importance of education; second, that they are not aware of quality standards or of what to demand from the state agencies. Focus-group discussions held with community members show that they are very aware of the importance of education and have a clear sense of what to expect from Islamic education and from modern education. Further, the community consists not only of the parents but also the traditional elders, and members of major religious networks. Discussions with the parents, as well as with the traditional elders and members of religious networks, reveal the community's acute awareness of and concerns about the poor state of state schools; they are also very aware of the causes of this failure, particularly of the political reasons that impede the smooth working of the education system: political appointment of teachers was, for

example, raised as a key concern in these discussions. In addition, the participants voiced major concerns about the poor physical condition of the schools, the lack of tables and chairs, the poor attitude of the teachers, the lack of adequate training of teachers, the lack of provision of learning material and books for children, and a general lack of interest and commitment from the state to invest in education. Some also raised concerns that even the appointment of education secretaries at the Local Government Education Authorities (LGEAs) and at times even the appointment of the Chairman of the State Universal Education Board (SUBEB) is politicised. Thus, unlike the SBMC model, which explicitly requires the community to remain 'apolitical', the members of these communities are very keen to focus on raising the underlying political problems impeding the provision of good-quality education in Nigeria. Yet giving voice to these concerns is not the primary concern of the SBMCs, which, as we have seen in Section 4, instead focus on teaching communities to make very specific apolitical demands. Being a product of the process of isomorphic mimicry, the members of the SBMCs follow all the steps they are asked to follow by the state or donor agencies but in following these guidelines they fail to actually listen to what the community really wants or the terms on which it is willing to engage.

The widespread prevalence of this phenomenon within the development sector can be captured by the diverse set of studies that record similar concerns about isomorphism. In a recent study, Muralidharan and Singh (2020) show how the attempt to adopt a School Improvement Plan intervention borrowed from the UK, which was seen to be highly successful and marked as 'best practice,' was implemented by the Indian bureaucracy in such a way that all of the boxes regarding how the programme should be implemented were ticked while having zero impact on anyone's behaviour. Combining several global 'best practices', such as developing plans for comprehensive assessments, detailed school ratings, and customized school improvement plans, the programme had no impact on either school functioning or student outcomes. As the authors note, the reason for this was that the programme did not change accountability structure or the incentives. Yet, assumed to be successful, the programme was scaled up to cover over 600,000 schools nationally. Thus, just as demonstrated in the case of SBMCs in Nigeria, the paper shows that 'ostensibly well-designed programs, that appear effective based on administrative measures of compliance, could in practice be ineffective' (Muralidharan and Singh 2020: 1), as they are too focused on copying a procedure deemed successful based on its working in another context instead of them developing in response to local realities.

Alatas, Pritchett, and Wetterberg (2002) note similar concerns about isomorphism in a paper examining the difference between 'endogenous' or organic associations functioning at the local level and 'government channelled' mechanisms in creating households' participation in social activities in villages in rural Indonesia. They show that the former improves governance but that the latter actually worsen it: the net effect of engagement in village government organisations is generally negative because the focus is on following set guidelines instead of genuinely engaging the community, while the net effect of membership in social organisations, which are community led, is more often associated with good governance outcomes.

Pritchett and Woolcock (2004) articulate this challenge quite provocatively in in a paper looking at causes of persistent failure of efforts to provide improved public services in developing countries by arguing that the solutions often are the problem. These failures, they note, occur because large bureaucracies operate by codifying and controlling decisions which often rules out engaging with local realities which require a more responsive mode of decision making; and, because of the widely held belief that modern bureaucracies are modelled on

Western countries and since they are prosperous simply adopting their institutional form elsewhere is the surest way of facilitating development.

Watkins (2017) records the inherent limitation of development interventions aimed at generating community participation by looking at how donors engage NGOs to win the communities over to their conception of desirable development goals. Studying why organisations that work with donors to reach the poor often fail to mobilise the communities in the context of Malawi, she shows that the focus of such programmes remains on holding training workshops for volunteers in order to make them absorb the donor's message and then use these volunteers to spread it within the communities. She records a complete lack of donor emphasis on using NGOs and volunteers to genuinely tap into the local realities and understand the community preferences or the resources that it might be able to bring to the process. The widespread evidence of NGOs' inability to generate genuine community participation under aid funded projects is thus not surprising (Bano 2012; Mansuri and Rao 2013).

Conclusion

Ensuring systematic community participation through state- and donor-led interventions has been recognised as a challenge not just in the field of education but also in other social service sectors (Bano 2012; Mansuri and Rao 2013). Induced participation, i.e. participation led by donors or governments, often fails to achieve lasting impacts; genuine participation that evolves organically within the community is normally more cost-effective and sustainable, as well as more efficient in meeting the targets (Mansuri and Rao 2013). With the aim of reviewing the impact of donor- and government-supported SBMCs on improving learning outcomes, as well as studying the processes that made SBMC establishment a national policy priority in Nigeria, this paper has shown how the push from the international community to support community participation through establishing SBMCs can in fact retard the actual reform process: it provides the education ministries with a means to prioritise policies that can help them win international legitimacy with least investment in actual reform. In line with the evidence reviewed from other developing countries, the Nigerian case has shown that donors and governments can easily establish SBMCs and can also ensure that a prescribed list of community members join these SBMCs and fulfil the prescribed duties. But that participation is not necessarily representative of community preferences or interests, as the whole question of whom to select, when to meet, and what to discuss is decided for the community by the designers of the intervention. Further, the evidence that establishing SBMCs helps to improve learning outcomes is negligible. These SBMCs can monitor teacher attendance, but even here the impact is limited: given that in many developing countries, including Nigeria, appointment to the post of government-funded teacher is a source of political patronage, and the ability of the local community to actually check teachers' behaviour, despite their attempts at monitoring, is limited. The prioritisation of SBMC establishment in Nigeria suggests that global interventions, which are less demanding in terms of addressing the underlying political-economy challenges to education, are more likely to be prioritised by the states with weak political commitment to reform. While apparently doing no harm, if not necessarily doing much good, such international agenda pushing in reality does have costs: it retards the reform process by providing these states with the opportunity to keep everyone's attention focused on superficial concerns, and to avoid being pressured or sanctioned for avoiding the implementation of actual reforms. Such global agenda setting also diverts attention away from identifying and learning from good practices from within the local context.

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