

RISE in Ethiopia: Non-technical Research Overview

The RISE Country Research Team will undertake analysis of national-level reforms that are intended to help Ethiopia make a pivot toward improved learning in the wake of its recent achievements in expanding primary school enrolment. A particular focus of the research will look at the reforms' effects on learning among marginalised students – among them, girls; those living in extreme poverty; those who are part of pastoralist (rural, nomadic herder) populations; those who speak minority languages; and those with special needs

The five-year, £3.9 million project is intended to expand understanding about whether and how broad, national-level reforms enhance or impede education in an extremely diverse country with limited resources. The focal point of the research is the government's flagship reform programme, the General Education Quality Improvement Package, a series of multi-faceted and evolving reforms.

Context

Ethiopia is one of the world's poorest countries, but it also has one of the fastest growing economies in Africa. The country aspires to reach 'lower-middle-income' status by 2025. Achieving this goal will require the transformation of an economy that has a large subsistence agriculture sector, and is dominated by low-productivity activities. One route toward making this transition is through improving education.

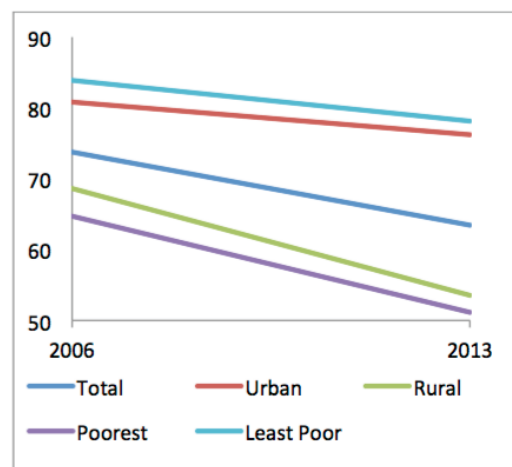
Primary school enrolment in Ethiopia has soared in recent years – increasing from 25 percent in 1994, to 94 percent in 2015, according to official figures. The number of students in all grades doubled over the same period, from 10 million to 20 million students. Though the gains in enrolment have been characterised as remarkable, inequalities are evident, with urban areas better served than rural ones. Certain populations are particularly vulnerable, and disadvantages tend to compound. For example, the poorest girls living in rural areas are least likely to attend school and learn.

The government has allocated a quarter of the total national budget to education, but as enrolment has surged, learning levels have not kept pace. For example, a lower proportion of 12-year-old children were able to answer the same math

questions correctly in 2013 than in 2006, according to a 2014 report by Young Lives, a long-term project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty in four developing countries, including Ethiopia. A likely reason for this is that many children now attending school are first-generation learners from diverse backgrounds. Literacy and education levels among the adult population are very low, a legacy of the lack of widespread, inclusive education for previous generations. As a result, the Young Lives report concluded, 'Many gaps remain to be closed through equitable and inclusive educational policies'.

Strains on the capacity of Ethiopia's schools and teachers

Figure 1: Inter Cohort Changes in Test Scores (% Correct) 2006-2013



Source: Data from Young Lives, 2014

are likely to remain for some time. Young people represent a large proportion of the Ethiopian population. While economic growth has been robust, the tax base remains relatively low. As a result, per pupil spending remains low, with (non-salary) expenditures as low as US\$2 per pupil annually. Though international aid agencies have supported various initiatives, improvements in educational outcomes will depend substantially on securing gains in efficiency, which is now the focus of government initiative.

At the same time, reaching the most marginalised

populations is likely to require additional resources. Languages offer an example of the challenges the educational system faces; more than 80 indigenous languages are spoken in Ethiopia. The sheer diversity of the geography of Ethiopian life, with the population living in urban areas, and distinctly different rural regions (highlands and lowlands), means that educational reforms must find methods that can improve the learning of students in diverse settings and difficult conditions.

Research issues

The Country Research Team's analysis will focus on the General Education Quality Improvement Package (GEQIP), an evolving, flagship education programme of reforms aimed at improving educational quality. Begun in 2013, the reform package is now in a second phase, with a third anticipated. Its programmes have yet to be subjected to systematic evaluation.

A key aspect of the research is its focus on understanding the political process that set the stage for change, and to understand the dynamics needed to devise, implement and sustain methods that ultimately lead to enhanced and equitable levels of learning. In the light of Ethiopia's ambitious and politically backed reform package, researchers want to know more about its political underpinnings. The research will examine how individual reforms that make up the package were selected, designed and implemented. The team will look closely at the political levers used by key decision makers in the process to understand how incentives, opportunities and barriers to change affect the outcome.

The complex and multi-faceted reforms underway in Ethiopia lend themselves to the 'systems-focused' approach of the RISE initiative. Broadly, the research will explore the nature of accountability within a large educational system, and among key people – administrators at national, regional and local levels, teachers, parents, and students.

Once researchers have a clear picture of the process that gave rise to the reform package, they will seek to understand whether and how reforms accomplish their main mission of improving learning outcomes for all children, regardless of their background. The team will conduct quantitative and qualitative research to gain insight into the extent to which reforms are working at scale, why certain reforms work or fail, and how to overcome any impediments.

Over the five-year period, researchers will seek to answer key questions that include:

Understanding the politics of change

How has the reform package been designed and implemented? How do participants involved select and design the reforms? To what extent are intended designs realised in implementation? How do incentives, opportunities or barriers affect the participants in their effort to design and implement effective programmes?

Examining the results on students' performance

How are students' learning outcomes affected by the reforms? What are the effects from initiatives intended to lead to equitable learning outcomes for Ethiopia's diverse populations?

Understanding the reasons for success or failure

How and why have reforms had success – or failed – in the mission to raise learning outcomes? What lessons can be learned from the reforms' design and implementation that can inform ongoing change and progress? How can successes or failures of the package inform the development of educational reforms in other country contexts?

The research project is designed to be longitudinal in nature – that is, studies will follow the same children in the same schools over the five-year period of the research project. The work will measure foundational skills in reading, vocabulary, numeracy, and non-cognitive skills, such as non-verbal reasoning and self-efficacy (self-belief in the ability to succeed or master certain tasks).

A core aspect of the research project is its combination of political analysis, and school-based case studies. This mix is intended to give the team the research tools to closely examine a wide variety of related issues, including political forces, regional differences, implementation matters, reform processes and strategies, and the perspectives of principals, teachers, PTA members, parents, and students.

Key reforms associated with the national package of measures include:

Teacher education, development and retention

In June 2016, the Government of Ethiopia announced salary increases for all teachers – increasing average salaries by roughly 25 percent. The increase was intended to boost teachers' motivation, and to bring skilled people who might have otherwise sought other employment into the teaching force. In addition, the government established new training programmes to see whether it would lead to improved student learning.

Pre-school to prepare for formal schooling

Nationally, all primary schools are required to introduce a year of pre-primary school in hopes of helping more children to prepare. The change was prompted by research showing that more than a quarter of Grade 2 students were unable to read a single word correctly.

New teaching methods

Ethiopia initiated reforms intended to improve reading skills of young elementary school children (Grades 1-4) in some 2,600 schools. The reforms replaced traditional lectures with more active teaching methods, and regularly tracked students' progress. In addition, teachers received reading materials and training in new techniques.

Students' nutrition

In Ethiopia and throughout the world, low learning levels are closely linked with poverty and malnutrition. To help retain students in school, the government is implementing a programme to feed children who might otherwise go to school hungry. Though the humanitarian aid agency, the World Food Programme, has been in operation in Ethiopia for many years, the Ethiopian government's national programme, which began in the 2016/17 school year, was expected to reach millions more students. A key determinant of the programme's success – or failure – will stem from headteachers' decisions regarding how to use funds provided to ensure the provision of food for the most disadvantaged. The programme has the potential to work through two routes: by leading to more consistent attendance, and by improving children's ability to concentrate and learn.

Helping school management to improve schools

Reforms give cash grants to schools for investments and purchases based on schools' enrolment levels. The reforms also offer local school administrators training in leadership skills, guidance on evidence-based planning,

and information about the importance of transparency, in particular, regarding the sharing of information on student achievement with the local community.

The potential benefits of the research project extend beyond Ethiopia. In some respects, Ethiopia's education system is a forerunner for other systems now looking to translate expansion in access into expansion in learning without leaving those from disadvantaged backgrounds behind. As a result, the research offers the opportunity to inform policies elsewhere.

Please contact info@rise.ox.ac.uk for additional information, or visit www.riseprogramme.org.

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