

Does Stakeholder Collaboration Improve Education Quality?

International education development has shifted focus from access to quality over the past decade. Policymakers, donors, and project implementers must ensure that education quality improvement efforts are perceived as successful by a wide variety of international, national, and local stakeholders. They face this challenge of defining success from diverse perspectives while maintaining control over resources and meeting demands for measurable, sustainable outcomes.

A review of policy change projects in Malawi shows that regular and effective collaboration among donors, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and communities can strengthen education quality improvement efforts. Collaborative policy and programming approaches were built into the earliest problem assessment stage of projects and remained central throughout the implementation and evaluation stages. Stakeholder interaction was instrumental in the widespread perception of success and the long-term sustainability of improvement efforts. Collaborative design and measures in Malawi helped fuel and capture the diversity of local innovations and provided space for communities and government personnel to collectively define and evaluate improvements to education quality.

Lessons learned from Malawi show that ongoing collaboration in the definition, implementation, measurement, and evaluation at every stage of an education quality improvement effort leads to greater effectiveness and increases the likelihood that the project or policy will meet the various stakeholders' needs. Effective collaboration requires regularized discussions and feedback loops between stakeholders, relying on early development of data collection, management, and dissemination tools. Consensus building, rather than top-down directives, forms the basis of communications between stakeholders, with no single group being perceived as elite or exclusive. Project design must be flexible enough to respond to stakeholders' differing perspectives, changing needs, and varied expectations. Stakeholder interaction during planning and implementation also prevents unintended outcomes, promotes sustainability, and results in the project being judged a success by a wider audience.

Improving the effects of reform efforts is particularly important in resource-poor settings where failed development programs represent a particularly onerous burden on students, education systems, and states. These findings from Malawi show that education quality improvement efforts are more effective when stakeholders collaborate on all aspects of the reform. Although including stakeholders from all levels in a single collective effort is not easy, the time and energy required to create and support ongoing collaboration will help ensure more effective, efficient, and sustainable education reform.



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For more information about EQUIP2, please contact:

USAID

Patrick Collins

CTO EGAT/ED
USAID Washington
1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20532
Tel: 202-712-4151
Email: pcollins@usaid.gov

FHI 360

John Gillies

EQUIP2 Project Director
1825 Connecticut Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20009
Tel: 202-884-8256
Email: equip2@fhi360.org
Web: www.equip123.net