

Pro-Poor Incentive Programmes in Education: Transparency and Accountability Issues

Background

In order to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), education authorities are faced with the major challenge of ensuring access for, and retention of all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, location, or gender. Achieving equal opportunities in education remains a challenge for decision-makers and educational planners, experience showing that more of the same is an inadequate response to the requirements and circumstances of the poorest. Indeed, it is imperative, not only to introduce flexibility in standardized procedures and uniform provisions, but also to change the inherent attitudes of both service providers and their beneficiaries.

Within this context, a wide variety of incentive programmes have been developed for those most in need, to help provide additional resources, and to create adequate conditions for their schooling and academic success. Such programmes attempt in particular to compensate for both direct and indirect costs of schooling, by redirecting resources to geographical areas, schools, or populations most in need, and by providing, for instance: additional funds to schools located in the poorest areas; scholarships or cash to pay for school costs, or other household expenses; free food or transportation for children to encourage school attendance, etc.

Challenges

The capacity of such programmes to promote equal opportunities or change-ingrained patterns of behavior, however, remains controversial. While some experts believe that they can successfully contribute to the achievement of education for all goals, others argue that their impact is limited due to a variety of factors, including: possible errors of inclusion (resources allocated to people outside the targeted population), or of exclusion (not all people, who should be, are served by the programme); opaque and unfair distribution of resources to beneficiaries; and also risks of fraud and

corrupt practices. These risks may include falsification of data or records, collusion between administrative staff and beneficiaries, and capture of resources by the local elite.

In this context, the pros and cons of various models of incentives (universal versus categorical targeting; cash versus in-kind transfers; conditional versus non-conditional allocations; top-down versus community-based approaches; etc.) are subject to debate. It led the International Institute for Educational Planning (UNESCO-IIEP) to conduct a study to compare different models for the design, targeting, and management of educational incentives, in order to identify those that have proven to be more/less successful in maximizing transparency and accountability, and in minimizing the likelihood of errors, fraud, and corrupt practices.

Case studies and variables

Seven pro-poor incentive programmes in education were selected, according to key variables identified empirically. These variables, seen as critical in influencing the degree of transparency and accountability of the programmes under analysis, are as follows: (i) selection of programme population (targeted vs. universal programme); (ii) focus of incentives (beneficiary-focused vs. school-focused); (iii) nature of incentives (cash-based vs. in-kind); (iv) granting of incentives: (conditional vs. unconditional); and (v) mode of implementation (centralized vs. decentralized).

The programmes included in the research are as follows: the National School Feeding Programme (Brazil); the Juntos conditional cash transfer programme (Peru); the Quintile Ranking System (South Africa); the Scholarship Programme of the Cambodia Education Sector Support Project (Cambodia); the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programme (India); the Opportunity New York City conditional cash transfer programme (United States); and the Primary Education for Disadvantaged Children project (Vietnam).

Pros and cons of different models

The study compares all seven programmes vis-à-vis several variables that characterize them, emphasizing the pros and cons, that their implementation involves, from a transparency and accountability perspective. It shows that some designs may pose greater challenges than others, namely those that are targeted, in-kind, conditional and decentralized or community-based:

- *Targeted* incentives tend to be more complex than universal ones, and involve many technical challenges to select and reach the targeted population; targeting may be subject to errors and manipulation;
- It may be longer for *in-kind* incentives to reach beneficiaries, as compared to cash-based incentives; the definition of needs appears, sometimes, subjective and vulnerable to manipulation;
- *Conditional* cash transfer schemes raise technical difficulties as regards the verification and enforcement of compliance criteria; they rely heavily on the existence of accurate and objective data;
- Several programmes, under study, demonstrate that *community involvement* can fall short of expectations in terms of transparency, or of the democratic nature of community participation.

Promising approaches

Simplified targeting, legal definition of responsibilities, robust evaluation frameworks, frequent and publicized report channels for active community participation, establishment of local transparency committees, use of school display boards, appeal mechanisms, informal whistle-blowing, social audits – these are among the various solutions presented in the above-mentioned cases that tend to enhance transparency and accountability. The Cambodian programme, for instance,

emphasizes the importance of publishing programme regulations; organizing awareness and training activities; excluding the children of local management committee members from the list of beneficiaries; and organizing ‘transparent ceremonies’ in the distribution of money.

Public access to information is also presented as essential to increase social control over the allocation and use of pro-poor incentives. The importance of information is illustrated through several examples. The role of the District Information System for Education (DISE) whereby information is made available online to the public after undergoing consistency checks, is highlighted in the Indian case. To improve the quality and to strengthen the reach of DISE data, the government has mandated that DISE data be publicly displayed in each school and read out loud to the local community during SMC meetings.

Conclusions

The study concludes that actions taken to confront existing risks to transparency and accountability is more important than the adoption of specific incentive models. By planning, monitoring and evaluating incentive programmes, based on an anti-corruption framework, policy-makers can greatly improve their returns on investment, ensuring that resources reach and serve those that need them most. The value of ‘mutual accountability systems’, whereby all actors are mutually accountable and subject to checks and balances, is emphasized in this context.

Reference

Poisson, Muriel (Ed.). 2014. *Achieving transparency in pro-poor education incentives*. Series: Ethics and Corruption in Education. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

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