Submission to the Commons Select Committee on DFID's work on education: Leaving no one behind?

Written evidence submitted from the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre, University of Cambridge

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Executive Summary

- Evidence of our Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the University of Cambridge shows that learning inequalities start in the early years. A failure to support cross-sectoral initiatives for early childhood development and address the quality of teaching in early grades of primary school results in widening of learning inequalities in later years.

- There is a strong case for DFID to focus on supporting the early years of primary school to ensure all children are acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills.

- In terms of adolescence and youth, DFID’s support would best be targeted at those who otherwise would not get access to secondary school or providing alternative forms of provision to those who have missed out. Such provision needs to be integrated with government systems, and provided on a far larger scale than exists currently given the large numbers who do not access secondary school.

- Despite impressive increases, millions of children remain out of school. They primarily include girls from poorest households, and children with disabilities. DFID should continue to focus its efforts on ensuring that these children get access to schools, and experience a conducive learning environment to learn once there.

- With respect to teacher quality, DFID can most effectively support efforts to increase learning outcomes by strengthening teacher preparation for teaching in diverse classroom environments during the early grades, and ensuring teaching is set at the right pace for weak learners to succeed.

- DFID programmes funded under the Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC) such as Camfed’s work in Tanzania and Zimbabwe are delivering innovative approaches to reaching the most marginalised girls. Providing an evidence-base to learn from these experiences for cost-effective scaling up should be a priority.

- Citizen-led learning assessments such as ASER and Uwezo provide important lessons on how collecting data on learning along with working with communities and schools can strengthen local accountability in ways that can transform learning.

- It is vital that DFID’s support remains evidence-driven to ensure its credibility and effectiveness. UK HE institutions have a key role to play in supporting this. UK HE institutions have experience of working in collaboration with partner countries in ways that can enhance their research capacity and strengthen the quality of research. The experience of UK HE institutions should also be drawn upon to strengthen research methods, as well as the measurement and monitoring of the SDGs.
Information about the REAL Centre
The REAL Centre pioneers research into overcoming barriers to education, such as poverty, gender, ethnicity, language and disability, and promotes education as an engine for inclusive growth and sustainable development. Our work is primarily in countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The Centre’s priorities and principles are clearly aligned with the call for evidence by the Commons Select Committee, and our submission draws directly on our evidence.

The principles underlying the REAL Centre’s work include:

- Adopting rigorous research methods: the research draws together the Faculty’s strengths in development conceptualising, measuring and analysing education inequalities, and in identifying the pathways through which excellence and equality in education transforms societies. Research approaches include impact evaluation, randomised control trials, and analysis of large-scale data sets (including longitudinal data) combined with community- and school-based qualitative approaches;

- Working in partnership with organisations and individuals in priority countries, building on and further strengthening the links that the Faculty already has made: Such collaborations involve partners jointly defining, planning, implementing and analysing the research in ways that contribute to joint publications. Where appropriate, it supports the development of research capacity of in-country partners and local stakeholders;

- Ensuring impact by linking evidence with policy, through the connections within the Faculty, and University and with policymakers nationally and globally: Where relevant, young people, families, teachers, educational leaders, teacher educators and other stakeholders, including those in poor communities, are encouraged to participate in the research process in ways that ultimately improve educational outcomes.

Further information about the REAL Centre, including its research themes, is available here.

1. Does DFID currently apportion enough priority and dedicate enough funding to its work on global education? Has it got the balance of spending on early years, primary, secondary and tertiary right?

DFID should focus on its comparative advantage – i.e. its long standing support to the early years of primary schooling, during which the majority of the most disadvantaged are excluded both in access and learning; with a targeted approach to secondary education to support the transition for disadvantaged adolescents completing primary school to reach the next level. Other donors are already funding higher education While also an important part of the system, this aid to higher education is already over one-third of total aid to education (see blog for further information) and investment in the earlier phases of education would benefit from relatively more investment to achieve the commitment of leaving no one behind.

2. Is DFID’s education funding being targeted appropriately? How effective are its interventions through multilateral organisations (e.g. Global Partnership for Education, the World Bank),
implementing partners, centrally managed programmes and direct support to government education budgets?

DFID has consistently been a lead donor to basic education and also provides a large share of aid to secondary education. It has been more effective than many other donors at targeting countries most in need, including fragile and conflict affected countries. Notably, DFID has moved beyond countries that are ‘traditional’ partner countries, to supporting countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo. While improvements can still be made, DFID should continue to build on this successful leadership in education.

DFID has also played an important role in being a lead donor to the Global Partnership for Education. Given the recent evaluation of GPE, it is important for DFID and other donors to continue to put pressure on GPE to prioritise its spending on those at risk of being left behind in access and learning primarily to basic education along with targeted approaches to secondary education. If GPE adopts the wide ranging SDG4 agenda, there is a danger that this will lead to resources shifting to higher levels which do not reach the most disadvantaged children and young people (for example our analysis shows that fewer than 1% of the poorest half of the population reach higher education in many sub-Saharan African countries – a key reason for which is the lack of education opportunities earlier in the system).

DFID’s support to the World Bank deserves continued scrutiny. While the World Bank supports many successful projects in education, its funding is not targeted at countries most in need – if anything, evidence suggests it has been moving away from supporting such countries.

The shift in recent years towards supporting large contractors to deliver education programmes rather than providing funding through direct budgetary support deserves evaluating. Is this delivering better results for the sustainability of education systems? What are the implications for national ownership, compared with donor support to sector-wide approaches supported through funding to government budgets? And, given the costs of contracting companies, does it achieve VfM?

3. Are there any best practice examples of DFID interventions in global education programmes? What is working well and can this be replicated? Are there any innovative approaches that could be scaled up?

DFID programmes funded under the Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC) are an important example of adopting an evidence-based approach with a strong focus on processes to raise learning outcomes, with particular attention to strategies to reach the most disadvantaged. One aspect of support through this programme has been the adoption of cross-sectoral approaches for example through child protection support to tackle gender-based violence within and outside the classroom.

Camfed’s programme in Tanzania and Zimbabwe targeting marginalized adolescent girls to support their entry to secondary school is a strong example of the success of the GEC. The REAL Centre are currently working with Camfed to research how to scale up and replicate their programme cost-effectively, given the strong evidence of its success in raising learning. Such information on cost-effectiveness and scaling up is rare in the education sector more generally, as systematic reviews have highlighted.

Another example is the Activity-Based Learning programme in Tamil Nadu, India. While our evaluation for DFID of the programme did not show clear positive impact on student learning outcomes, it highlighted changes in classrooms processes. Learning interactions between students
and teachers were transformed, which are likely to have positive impact on achievement over an extended period of time. To have an impact on learning, it was clear that such pedagogical interventions need to be supported through effective in-service training.

4. How can DFID best support efforts to secure access to primary education for the most marginalised children, including getting the 59 million out-of-school children into education?

Children predominantly from poor families and those with moderate and severe disabilities (see http://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/access-and-learning-are-equally-important-children-disabilities) are amongst those who continue to be excluded from accessing primary school. Our research shows that parents, including those from poor families’ value schooling for their children with disabilities - hence they are important for advocacy and also building local accountability. DFID has already shown leadership in supporting children with disabilities, and should continue to make this a key focus of support.

It is also important that DFID supports the learning of those who are entering school for the first time (including children with disabilities as well as other first-generation learners) to ensure they do not continue to be excluded within the classroom itself and so are at risk of dropping out early on. This requires, for example, ensuring teachers are equipped with skills to teach in diverse classrooms; and that curriculum is set at the right pace such that slower learners are not neglected (see Section 4: http://www.heart-resources.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Rose-and-Alcott-2015.pdf).

5. Should DFID support low-fee schools, including private schools, in developing countries? If so, what should this support look like? If not, how can universal access be achieved?

Low-fee private schools are a reality in countries where government systems are seen to be failing. The evidence available suggests that, while learning levels might be higher in these schools, many children are still not learning. Moreover, the vast majority of the available evidence shows these schools do not promote equity. Even relatively low fees are out of reach of the poorest households. As such, children in these households are either out of school, or in government schools. Our evidence, drawing on data from East Africa and South Asia, further indicates inequalities within schools: children from rich households studying in government schools are more likely to be learning than children from poor households in private schools. As such, a key policy question is how to ensure children from poor households have the same opportunity to learn as children from rich households, regardless of the type of school they attend. And from a donor perspective, a key policy issue is the need to continue to support government schools where most of disadvantaged children are based. Such support is likely to ensure a more sustainable system in the longer term.

6. How can DFID most effectively support efforts to increase learning outcomes, particularly ensuring that those children in school are gaining proficiency in literacy and numeracy?

Key to the question on increasing learning outcomes is a need to focus on the early grades, particularly to strengthen teaching quality during this period and to prepare teachers to teach in diverse classrooms. Supporting cross-sectoral initiatives for early childhood development are also important to ensure children are ready to enter school. Our evidence from a range of countries clearly shows that a failure to do so results in widening of learning inequalities in later years, at which point it becomes more difficult to tackle the problems. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds who are not learning are the most likely to dropout in the early grades, and so would not benefit from initiatives later on. See (4) above on policy areas that are likely to be key to supporting literacy and numeracy.
Important lessons can also be learnt from the experience of ASER and Uwezo in India, Pakistan, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Through citizen-led learning assessments, their initiatives have brought to the fore the low levels of learning, providing communities with data with which to hold schools and other key stakeholders to account at the local level. The PAL network is now moving this work to the next stage, with a shift from assessment to action within local communities and with schools. Such work deserves support to strengthen local accountability in ways that can transform learning.

7. **Should DFID be doing more to support countries in developing more effective education systems, including high quality teacher education and leadership training?**

More attention to supporting high quality teacher education – both pre-service and on-going – is important. Evidence suggests that teaching quality is key to improving attainment. These programmes need to pay particular attention to preparing teachers for diverse classrooms, and providing them with support in teaching children who are at risk of falling behind. Effective use of formative assessment is a key aspect of this – enabling teachers to identify those at risk, and providing them with skills to address the problems that these children face. This is a key feature of raising literacy and numeracy skills.

8. **Does DFID need to develop a greater focus on tertiary education, including technical and practical education? How can it support efforts to ensure that the growing youth population in many of its bilateral partner countries are given the life skills they need?**

As noted in (1), while tertiary education and technical/practical education is important, it is not a comparative advantage of DFID’s work. Other donors (such as Germany) have extensive experience in this area and early years/primary and secondary education remains a pressing priority if even the most basic SDG4 targets are to be met. In addition, given that fewer than 1% of the poorest reach higher education largely due to problems earlier in the education system, such support would not directly ensure support to those who are being left behind.

There is however a strong case for DFID to support alternative/non-formal education for adolescents and young people who have dropped out of the formal system and might otherwise be neglected. DFID should focus its efforts in reaching out of school children with programmes that are meaningful to them, with a curriculum that is appropriate for children who are learning foundational skills at an older age and with appropriate teaching methods (differentiated by age and ability, for instance). These programmes should be seen as complementary to national education system provision and not as substitute. Service providers should work within governments, or governments should monitor closely the provision of alternative education.

The Girls’ Education Challenge offers some strong examples of such programmes. DFID’s support to Ghana’s Complementary Basic Education programme is another good example of a programme that has been scaled up to reach large numbers of disadvantaged young people. We will be evaluating this programme, including identifying the trajectory of the beneficiaries of this programme from education either back into education or into the workplace. Similarly, our research on Speed Schools in Ethiopia identified significant increases in maths and literacy from the accelerated learning experience. A key factor driving the increase in academic attainment is the pedagogical approach, which is active, based on children's participation, and teaching to the right level – with similarities to India’s Activity Based Learning programme. Our current work is building evidence to see whether there are long term benefits of the accelerated learning experience, in particular following the children over time as they make the transition into formal schools. There is a need for more extensive evidence of this kind to understand the benefits of such programmes and related skills.
development programmes targeting marginalized young people for the workplace, and how they can be strengthened. Such evidence needs to be differentiated by markers of disadvantage – recognizing the intersections between these – including by gender, poverty and disability.

9. How should the UK Government involve UK Higher Education institutions in its work?

It is vital that DFID’s support remains evidence-driven to ensure its credibility and effectiveness. UK HE institutions have a key role to play through supporting research and evidence on key issues related to education to leave no one behind. Where such work is undertaken in partnership with researchers in DFID-recipient countries, this can help achieve another important goal which has to be to increase the quantity and quality of in-country research capacity. UK HE institutions are a global leader in this respect, and have a stronger track record in such collaboration than counterparts in the US, for example.

In addition, UK HE institutions have a wealth of experience in generating and analysing high quality data within the UK itself in ways that has been successful in informing policy. It would be beneficial to draw upon such experience more fully to ensure the adoption of methods to better understand education in partner countries.

The experience of UK HE institutions could also be drawn upon to strengthen the measurement and monitoring of the SDGs, such as developing a global learning metric. They already have a track record in engaging in discussions on the development of indicators with UN and other organisations.

10. How best can DFID support efforts to eliminate inequalities in access and quality of education on the basis of gender, disability, indigeneity, and for children in vulnerable situations, including emergencies?

See responses above.