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## **Engaging national-level stakeholders in researching education quality: Bridging policy-practice-research-advocacy in Uganda, Senegal, Burundi and Malawi**

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### **Background**

National governments and international organizations tend to measure education quality by restrictive proxies such as examination results, registration statistics and completion rates. These strategies often say little about the type of experience students are having in schools and the core skills and capacities they will have when they leave school.

At the same time, there is much evidence that bringing collective academic, policy and practice wisdom together to influence educational outcomes is a challenge. With this in mind, the Hewlett/Gates-funded “Improving Learning Outcomes in Primary Schools” (ILOPS) project in Uganda, Malawi, Burundi and Senegal set out to create an opportunity for academics, educators, policy makers and leading advocates to design, develop and lead research into education quality in their countries. This paper, based on the overall project and final evaluation, highlights the process and personal and professional outcomes for ILOPS participants.

In 2007, ActionAid with the support of the Institute of Education-London began the ILOPS project with the overall goal of contributing to improve primary school learning outcomes through the active participation of parents, teachers and other key actors. As part of ILOPS, relevant actors came together in national-level teams to identify issues, design research methods, collect evidence and interpret findings. National team members included: National Ministry of Education officials; national research institutes; district level Ministry staff; national education coalitions, advocacy / campaign groups; Teachers Unions (national and branch level); national, district and community-based NGOs; adult education organizations; parents; and, community leaders.

This paper builds on the process, outcomes and evaluation of the ILOPS project. The paper provides a brief overview of the ILOPS participatory research methods and highlights findings from the comparative analysis. More importantly, the paper focuses on the conceptual framework and findings from the ILOPS evaluation involving 30 ILOPS team member interviews exploring their experiences and perceived impact of their ILOPS participation.

### **Research Questions**

The paper highlights briefly the three distinct sets of methods involved in the overall project. The first section details the methods navigating the participatory research process and build the overall conceptual model for the project. The second set of methods relates to the actual in-country data gathering strategies including national, district and school level interviews of which over 6000 were conducted across the four countries. Finally, related of the evaluation of the project, the design of the interview instrument and structure of the interviews is explained. We decided to have all participants in the programme interviewed so sampling was not an issue within the design. Within this final section, we describe the analysis process for the interviews and the process for all components of the work of sharing the findings with the broader education and policy communities.

### **Frame**

Within the scope of this paper, we only briefly highlight findings national and comparative ILOPS studies. We focus instead on data from the evaluation interviews of the process and practice of ILOPS. Participants state that the international component of the work and the participatory research design, data collection and analysis, has had a considerable influence on their professional

development and research understanding and skills development. Also, participants share that ILOPS facilitated a shared understanding of the problems, created a wider and more representative platform for discussions around policies and developed strategies for improving learning outcomes and stimulated a vibrant debate around the perceived roles and expected responsibilities of each participating stakeholder group. In the end, the rewards of undertaking collaborative research outweighed the challenges as questions such as what and how well children are learning are now being addressed by a range of actors.

Undertaking such an important and complex project in one country is a challenge. The decision to provide participants an opportunity to work, in this way, across four countries is even more commendable. The decision to adopt a multi-stakeholder collaborative research design, rooted in participatory research design, was a strategic move that provided participants with an opportunity to develop a range of skills that, without ILOP, may not have been possible. The value of the in-country collaboration between stakeholders, as well as the international collaboration, will create a lasting legacy for all participants and their home countries. Throughout the interviews, we were encouraged to learn of the positive experiences of ILOP participants in each country. Similarly, we were thankful for the honesty and forward thinking of participants that will ensure that any future projects of this nature are even stronger.

## **Research findings**

Within the scope of this paper, we only briefly highlight findings national and comparative ILOPS studies. We focus instead on data from the evaluation interviews of the process and practice of ILOPS. Participants state that the international component of the work and the participatory research design, data collection and analysis, has had a considerable influence on their professional development and research understanding and skills development. Also, participants share that ILOPS facilitated a shared understanding of the problems, created a wider and more representative platform for discussions around policies and developed strategies for improving learning outcomes and stimulated a vibrant debate around the perceived roles and expected responsibilities of each participating stakeholder group. In the end, the rewards of undertaking collaborative research outweighed the challenges as questions such as what and how well children are learning are now being addressed by a range of actors.

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This paper highlights an interactive process for engaging stakeholders in develop knowledge, skills and understanding about research and about quality education in their countries. Based on the feedback from participants, their engagement in the process has had a significant influence not only on their confidence and interest in research-informed practice and research but also a better understanding of their national-level education colleagues.

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This paper will be of interest to researchers, practitioners and policy makers interested in bringing together the collective wisdom on educational quality to improve student experience. The paper directly addresses strategies and outcomes of how to engage diverse national-level stakeholders in the process of generating new knowledge and applying it to their educational context and professional practice.

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