

Education Think Piece Series

UNICEF has commissioned 10 Think Pieces by leading researchers and practitioners to stimulate debate around significant educational challenges facing the Eastern and Southern Africa region. While the pieces are rooted in evidence, they are not research papers or evidence briefs, nor do they represent UNICEF policy. Rather, they are engaging pieces that aim to inspire fresh thinking to improve learning for all.

The Delivery Approach: a panacea for accountability and system reform?

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UNICEF works with partners to strengthen education systems. Our tools are education sector analysis and plans, however, what can be lacking are frameworks in education to ensure these plans achieve results in the classroom. This Think Piece explores one approach: the delivery approach.

Education system actors across Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) face a common set of challenges when it comes to translating education sector policies and plans into results. These include:

1. Lack of clarity as to the practical steps needed to turn national policy commitments into tangible outcomes.
2. Lack of joined-up working at national level; policy priorities falling across or between various councils, boards or agencies with unclear accountability for results.
3. The national-level challenge of ensuring the quality of service delivery when responsibility is devolved to local level. If results are poor in a local area, it is still often the national government which gets the blame for this.
4. Focus across government on processes and procedures rather than outcomes. This leads to a limited sense of urgency to make a positive difference within schools.
5. Lack of sufficient human and financial resources throughout the system and a general sense of acceptance that these constraints mean that policy goals may never be achieved.
6. Lack of local-level understanding of national commitments means that intended results are frequently not realized.
7. Lack of understanding at the centre of government and among other stakeholders as to what is needed at an institutional level (school, college, etc.) to deliver high-quality services as well as lack of awareness of the constraints faced by front-line professionals in delivering these services.

These issues can sometimes seem overwhelming and can compound each other, leading to a sense of resignation amongst civil servants and stakeholders across the education system that radical change and improvements in educational outcomes are simply not possible. Once this attitude sets in, it can be exceedingly difficult to challenge. Pessimism becomes reinforcing and certain facts (such as private schools consistently outperforming government schools) are accepted as the norm. These accepted norms are then used to mitigate accountability: “How can the public education system be expected to perform better when this is just how things are?”

Overcoming these challenges is not easy but, with the right level of political will and commitment, there are a set of practices, tools and techniques which governments can harness to bring about rapid improvements in specific areas of the education system. These tools comprise what is called the ‘Delivery Approach’ and this Think Piece aims to set out the key principles of the Approach, examine the growing body of evidence around it and demonstrate how governments can use it to strengthen the accountability of their education systems and improve learning for all.

The Delivery Approach – why are people talking about it?

In recent years, there has been growing interest across governments and across multilateral and bilateral development agencies in looking beyond the formulation of best practice policies and in focusing on implementation and ‘getting things done’. At the heart of this interest has been a set of ideas and structures which can be termed the ‘Delivery Approach’. This was initially popularized in the early 2000s by the UK Government’s Prime Ministerial Delivery Unit (PMDU).

The World Bank, under the leadership of President Jim Yong Kim, has played a key role in advancing thinking on the Delivery Approach or what it initially termed the ‘science of delivery’.¹ Dan Hymowitz from the Africa Governance Initiative (AGI) think tank points out that achieving results through the Delivery Approach is as much of an art as it is a science, as it requires a shrewd understanding of politics and incentives.² The Education Commission, through its Pioneer Country Initiative, has been working with Ministries of Education worldwide since November 2016 to examine how they can use the Delivery Approach to improve educational outcomes.

The Delivery Approach has gained such purchase because it is intended to bring about a transformative shift in attitudes and behaviour towards public service delivery. That said, it is more than just a narrow, technical approach to implementation challenges. The Delivery Approach consists of a set of tools and techniques which can certainly assist in ‘getting things done’, but the important thing is how these tools, and the incentive structures and accountability mechanisms which surround them, are applied. What works in one country, district or region will not necessarily be successful if rigidly applied elsewhere.

¹ Gonzalez Asiz, M. & Woolcock, M., Operationalising the Science of Delivery Agenda to Enhance Development Results, 2015.

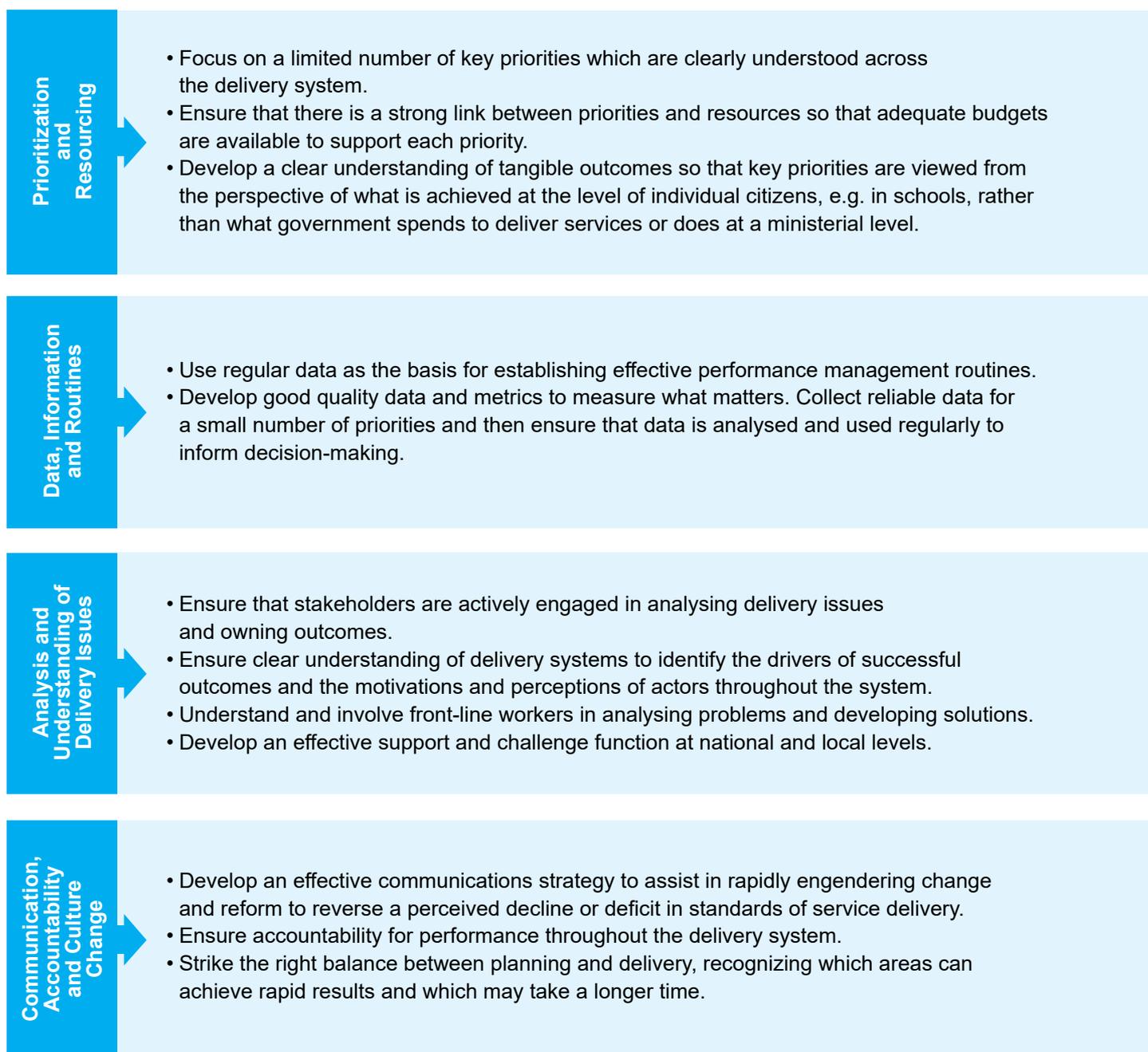
² Hymowitz, D., Too much science, not enough art, Tony Blair Africa Governance Initiative, 2016.

Principles of the Delivery Approach

Over the past decade, the Delivery Approach has been implemented across various sectors, including education, in a diverse range of countries, such as Australia, Chile, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, UK and USA. These experiences have led to a growing body of literature on the Delivery Approach and the principles behind its successful application.³

In addition to this, the World Bank's report 'Facing Forward: Schooling for Learning in Africa' talks of the need to close the gap in institutional capacity in order to enable effective service delivery. The report identifies five capacity areas which are required, if Ministries of Education are to strengthen the link between science and service delivery. These specific areas are consistent with the principles of the Delivery Approach, which are summarized below:⁴

Figure 1: Principles of the Delivery Approach



³ See for example Barber, M., 'The origins and practice of delivery', McKinsey Voices on Society Vol.5, The Art and Science of Delivery, 2013; World Bank, GET Note: Center of Government Delivery Units, 2010; Shostak, R. et al., 'When Might the Introduction of a Delivery Unit be the Right Intervention?' 2014; Todd, R. & Attfield, I., 'Big Results Now! in Tanzanian Education: Has the Delivery Approach delivered?' 2017; Todd, R.; Martin, J. & Brock, A., 'Delivery Units: can they catalyse sustained improvements in education service delivery?' 2014.

⁴ The five specific capacity building areas identified by the World Bank (2018) are the generation and use of data; technical capacity; coordination among institutions; accountability and incentives; and negotiation and consensus building with stakeholders.

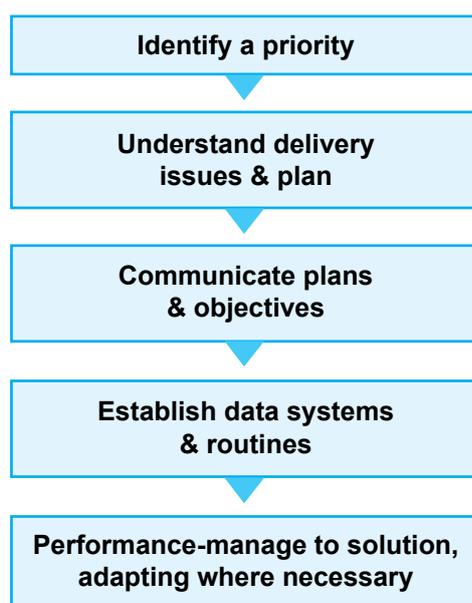
None of the principles set out in figure 1 are particularly revelatory, complex or exceptional. These are common sense things which every government should be seeking to do in one form or another. However, it is interesting to note that, in so many countries, these principles are not being effectively applied. Thus, countries should start from an assessment of their existing strengths and weaknesses. Building on existing strengths, rather than focussing predominantly on weaknesses, is an important part of the approach. It is also critical that any priorities, processes and structures are genuinely country-owned rather than imposed from outside.

One of the most difficult things when introducing the Delivery Approach is trying to explain how it differs from what ministries and stakeholders have been doing already. In many ways it is not completely new, and actors in any education system are likely to have been applying some of the key principles in aspects of their work.

What is different about the Delivery Approach, however, is how the four principles come together in a coordinated, catalytic manner to address a specific problem or issue, focussing ‘like a laser’ until performance has improved.⁵

The Delivery Approach process, as set out in figure 2, will not work unless there is a genuine desire from system leaders to achieve results and a willingness to devote significant time and effort to ensuring that accountability flows throughout the delivery system.

Figure 2: Delivery Approach Process Flow



The Delivery Approach can therefore be effective in scenarios where system leaders have a genuine desire to bring about change but are constrained by the ability, capability and willingness of the delivery system to achieve results. In such instances, the Delivery Approach can reflect the accountability of system leaders through tight performance monitoring and feedback mechanisms to bring about real change at a local level. If system leaders are not genuinely committed to change or if the delivery system does not recognize or respect their authority, then structures such as steering committees or similar accountability mechanisms will become ineffective talking shops or examples of ‘isomorphic mimicry’.⁶

The need for total commitment to the steps above cannot be overemphasized. The initial prioritization of issues is not an easy task for system leaders who are used to listing large numbers of priorities. Genuine prioritization means accepting trade-offs, focussing on success in one area to the detriment of others and, by implication, de-prioritizing important areas. However, this prioritization is a necessary first step if the Delivery Approach is to achieve results.

Once prioritization has been carried out, the steps in figure 2 can be followed. This will involve establishing accountability structures such as a committee or board to oversee progress. To be effective, this will need to be chaired personally by the system leader and take place on a very regular basis. During Sierra Leone’s response to Ebola, President Koroma chaired a weekly meeting where ministers (including the Minister of Education) would present on progress against their Ebola Recovery Plan Priorities. This weekly accountability routine helped deliver real change in the education system by forcing the minister to establish a similar weekly structure within the ministry where all directors would meet every Monday to review progress and identify obstacles. This in turn meant that directors needed to engage with District Education Offices, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other stakeholders on a weekly basis to ensure that progress was being made. UNICEF’s RapidPro SMS system was then used to gather monthly performance data from schools to identify issues and blockages which the minister and president could then seek to resolve.

⁵ “It [the Delivery Unit] would focus like a laser on an issue, draw up a plan to resolve it working with the department concerned, and then performance-manage it to solution. It would get first-class data which it would use for stocktakes that I took personally with the minister, their key staff and mine, every month or so.” Tony Blair, UK Prime Minister from 1997 to 2007, writing in his autobiography ‘A Journey’ in 2010.

⁶ Andrews, Pritchett & Woolcock, (2012) explain how countries can fall victim to ‘capability traps’ when they practice ‘isomorphic mimicry’ (deliberately imitating the external appearance or characteristics of best-practice structures without any intention of achieving their stated purpose) by introducing reforms which enhance an organization or agency’s external legitimacy without improving performance.

The Delivery Approach and Education Sector Plans

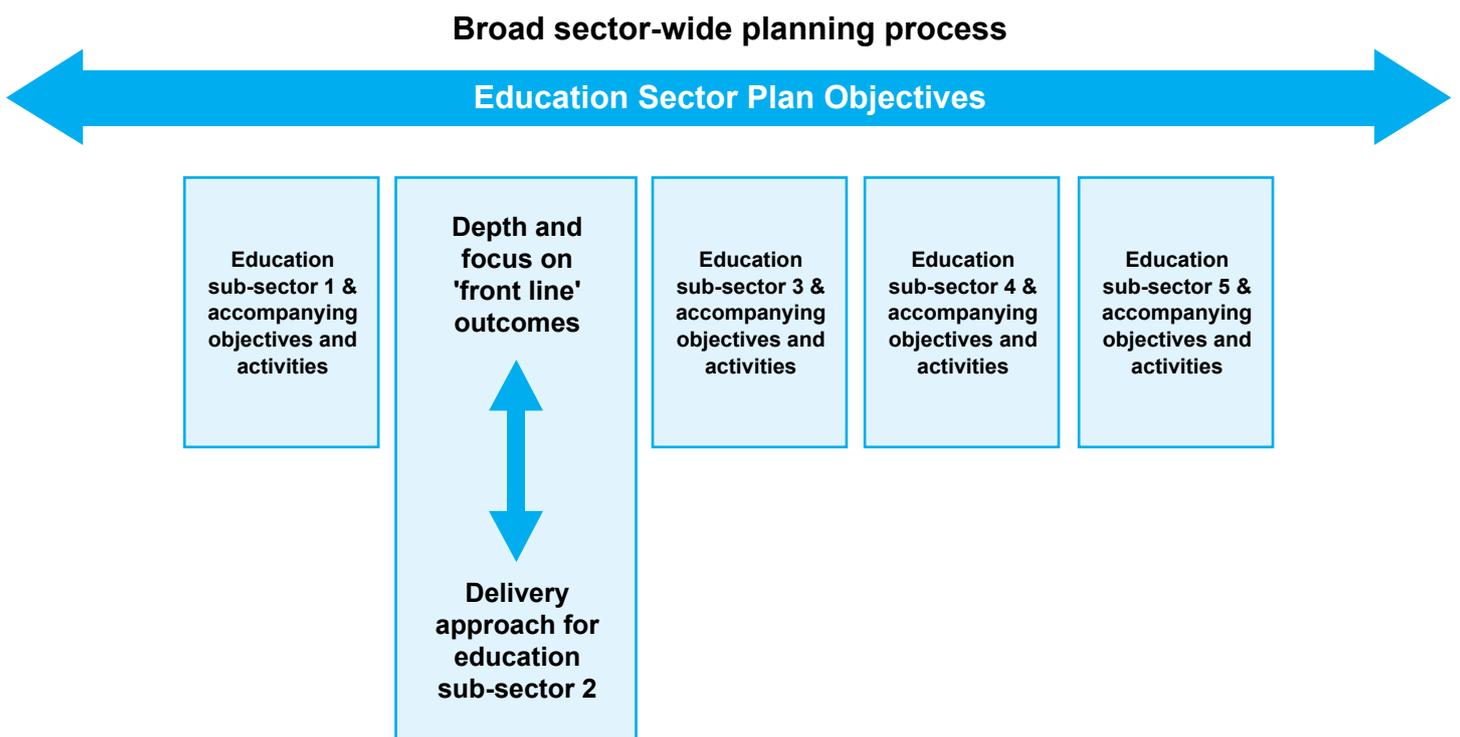
There are strong linkages and complementarities between the Delivery Approach and wider Education Sector Planning approaches. It can be helpful to see the Education Sector Plan (ESP) as an overall framework for educational improvement whereas the Delivery Approach involves a set of specific tools and a focussed accountability approach which can be used to deliver results within the ESP framework. It is important from the start of the planning process to recognize the synergies of aligning the two, rather than viewing them as separate or parallel processes.

An ESP is a comprehensive medium-term planning document which sets out the full range of initiatives, goals and objectives which countries want to achieve, linked to international commitments. These initiatives are costed and linked inextricably with the budget and planning process. One of the possible drawbacks of ESPs is that, by their nature, they can be both incremental in approach (rather than setting out a radical transformation plan) and all-encompassing in nature (covering all aspects of the education system in such a comprehensive manner that it is not clear what are truly government priorities or what hard choices or trade-offs will be made to adequately resource and achieve these priorities).

By contrast, the Delivery Approach focusses on a small number of key priorities within an identified sub-sector of the education system. It therefore has an exclusive rather than an inclusive focus and operates to a short-term timescale: aiming to bring about meaningful and measurable results over a period of months (up to a maximum of three years). It has a very explicit focus on transformational change in delivery and working culture to address areas of underperformance in the education system. The potential drawbacks of this approach are the possible loss of focus on non-priority (but still essential) areas of the education system, a concentration on short-term, easily measurable results and the possible generation of new sets of activities without an adequate financing or resourcing plan.

The T-shaped diagram below illustrates how an alignment of ESPs with the Delivery Approach can help to ensure that countries benefit from the advantages of both approaches. In essence, such an alignment entails placing a transformational set of culture-change activities within a broader, comprehensive and fully-costed ESP. Sierra Leone provides a good example of a country which attempted to align the Delivery Approach with its Global Partnership for Education (GPE) application and Education Sector Planning process in 2017.

Figure 3: The Delivery Approach in Education Sector Planning



Applying the Delivery Approach in education

In **Sierra Leone**, the President's Recovery Priorities (2015-17) were overseen by the President's Delivery Team and proved successful at delivering on several basic building blocks for the education system, including classroom construction, production and dissemination of lesson plans to all primary and junior secondary schools, completion of a national payroll verification exercise and the introduction of a national school feeding programme. The programme was led by the government but involved multiple stakeholders, including UNICEF and several NGOs (Education Commission, 2017).

Given the depth and focus that the Delivery Approach can bring, many ministries of education have established Delivery Units as part of their application of the Delivery Approach principles to education.⁷ Such units can add real value in driving change but they should not be adopted just for the sake of having one.⁸ Any reform which starts with a focus on structures rather than purpose and objectives is at risk of creating parallel processes which may ultimately be counter-productive. There are as many (if not more) examples of failed Delivery Units as there are of successful ones.

What is important, though, is ensuring that the priorities selected and the data collection methods are congruent with the country's state of educational development. During the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, the focus of the Delivery Approach was on ensuring that the basic provisions for an effective education system were put in place: classrooms constructed, lesson plans available in every school, a teacher payroll which reflected reality, etc. In many ways, the Delivery Approach, with its focus on rapid data collection and measurable priorities, lends itself to measuring simpler, more tangible results.

In Punjab, Pakistan, the initial focus of the Delivery Approach was on ensuring that teachers were present in schools, that basic infrastructure was in place and that pupils were attending. Once this had achieved results and the system was responding well to the new accountability processes and mechanisms, the Delivery Approach was extended to focus on improving early-grade learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy. There was a natural evolution to this process. If the Delivery Approach had been used to focus on learning outcomes before addressing these more basic issues, it would have failed.

In **Punjab** the Education Reform Roadmap commenced in late 2010, led by the Chief Minister and with an initial focus on teacher attendance, student attendance, provision of school facilities and monitoring visits to schools. Bi-monthly stocktakes chaired by the Chief Minister made effective use of real-time performance monitoring through 'heat maps' to drive accountability and behaviour change. The Approach has subsequently focused on improving Primary Grade 3 literacy and numeracy outcomes. By 2018, this has started to yield tangible results and Punjab is the only province in Pakistan where public schools have narrowed the performance gap against their private counterparts (Jhagra, 2018).

⁷ Examples include Ghana, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, UK and USA. In a number of these countries (notably Ghana and Uganda), the Ministerial Delivery Units have just recently been established.

⁸ The World Bank has written a useful paper which contains a checklist for countries to decide whether a Delivery Unit is necessary to oversee successful implementation: Shostak, R. et al., When Might the Introduction of a Delivery Unit be the Right Intervention? 2014.

Likewise, in country contexts where capacity and capability are more developed, a less prescriptive approach to change can be taken, with the Delivery Approach being used to set and monitor objectives and targets which local government units (and schools in some cases) then have the freedom to apply their local ingenuity to in order to achieve them. Recent studies have shown that this approach played an important role in promoting economic growth and development in China over the past two decades.⁹

The Delivery Approach can play a role in addressing equity and targeting the most marginalized children, but this has to be an explicit priority and focus. Setting targets related to equitable access and using the Delivery Approach to identify barriers and improve performance can be successful. However, if targets are set without paying explicit attention to equity issues, there will be a danger that results may be achieved by disregarding marginalized groups and inadvertently widening inequalities.

In **Tanzania** Big Results Now! (BRN!) was introduced in early 2013 to deliver transformational change in the education sector through a set of nine activities aimed at increasing resource flows to schools, and at improving pass rates and attainment levels in the early grades in reading, writing and arithmetic. An Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) showed that the proportion of Standard 3 students classed as 'non-readers' declined from 28% to 16%, whilst the proportion of students classed as 'progressing readers' increased from 22% to 31% between 2013 and 2016 whilst, from late 2015, there were significant improvements in the regularity and size of financial flows to schools (Todd and Attfield, 2017).



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⁹ Ang, Y-Y., How China Escaped the Poverty Trap, 2017.

Potential Drawbacks of the Delivery Approach

It is important to recognize that adopting the Delivery Approach and establishing structures such as Delivery Units may have negative as well as positive consequences for national education systems. The Delivery Approach is not a 'magic bullet' or a panacea for education system problems. Possible negative consequences of adopting the Delivery Approach include:

- There may not be genuine political commitment, and the establishment of a Delivery Unit may actually be an example of 'isomorphic mimicry'. Isomorphic mimicry is where governments establish best practice structures to tackle delivery issues, but underlying incentives or ways of working remain unchanged. Establishing new structures is almost always easier than tackling entrenched and intransigent delivery issues.
- The introduction of a Delivery Unit and a new delivery plan may create parallel structures, systems and processes. Rapid data gathering systems which are established purely for the purposes of monitoring performance against new targets can undermine existing systems. There is a danger that this will ultimately reduce the accountability and pressure on existing structures to report and monitor progress.
- The danger of concentrating on structure rather than substance. When introducing the Delivery Approach, it is important to focus on the interface between services and citizens and then work backwards to look at the most appropriate structures and processes required to support this interaction and unblock obstacles to delivery. Some education systems will be centralized and require significant central intervention to address issues, whereas others may be more decentralized and require different types of support.
- Target-setting has been proven to be an effective means of stimulating performance improvements. It is important to note, however, that any new target runs the risk of creating perverse incentives and being subject to gaming. It is very important, therefore, to think through the potential unintended consequences of targets before introducing them. As an example, in Tanzania, the primary and secondary examination targets for Big Results Now!¹⁰ were expressed as a pass rate percentage. This involves two numbers – the number of students sitting the exam and the number of students passing the exam – and is therefore open to gaming. Introducing linked targets and performance measures can be one way of reducing the potential for perverse incentives and gaming.
- On occasion, the Delivery Approach can focus on the easily measurable rather than the genuinely important. The Delivery Approach can play an important role in transforming public sector culture to focus much more on results and impacts. This can lead to strengthened systems and improved results. However, it is important to recognize that focussing on short-term, measurable changes could run the risk of overlooking more substantive issues which would take longer to address. Viewing the education sector through a succession of short-term improvement plans can potentially relegate longer-term issues to secondary importance.



¹⁰ This was a programme that brought the Delivery Approach to seven ministries in government.

What could UNICEF's role be in applying the Delivery Approach?

UNICEF is an influential body which has strong relationships with ministries of education across multiple countries. UNICEF Education Specialists can play an important role in assisting countries to apply the Delivery Approach, where the conditions are appropriate, by:

- Identifying those countries where there is genuine high-level political commitment to achieving improved educational outcomes and working with ministers and senior officials to raise their awareness of the Delivery Approach.
- Encouraging countries to consider which activities within their ESP can be prioritized and used to trial an application of the Delivery Approach. Achieving success in one specific area can be very influential in encouraging a culture of positivity where officials and the public believe that genuine change is possible.
- Providing capacity building support and expert advice to those countries that wish to apply the Delivery Approach

The Delivery Approach, therefore, can provide a useful set of tools and techniques which UNICEF country offices can utilize to improve focussed educational outcomes within their specific country contexts.



In summary

In returning to the list of challenges that education system actors face across ESA, this think piece has demonstrated how the Delivery Approach may help to address them:

Challenges

The issue of lack of clarity as to the practical steps needed to turn national policy commitments into tangible outcomes.

Lack of joined-up working at national level: policy priorities falling across or between various councils, boards or agencies with unclear accountability for results.

The national level challenge of ensuring the quality of service delivery when responsibility is devolved to local level. If results are poor in a local area, it is still often the national government which gets the blame for this.

Focus across government on process and procedures, rather than on outcomes with little sense of urgency to make a positive difference within schools.

A lack of sufficient human and financial resources throughout the system and a general sense of acceptance that these constraints mean that policy goals will never be achieved.

Lack of local-level understanding of national commitments means that intended results are never realized. Lack of local-level understanding of national commitments means that intended results are never realized.

Lack of understanding at the centre of government as to 'what good looks like' at an institutional level (school, college, etc.) where services are actually delivered and a lack of awareness of the constraints faced by front-line professionals in delivering these services.

How the Delivery Approach addresses these challenges

Focussing on a specific set of priorities and drawing up a detailed delivery plan based on a solid understanding and analysis of issues.

Establishing performance monitoring and oversight structures drawing upon the reflected authority of the senior system leader.

Instituting quality performance management and data systems through the collection of regular information on a small number of priorities. This information is then used to hold local authorities to account for results.

A sense of urgency is instilled through performance monitoring arrangements which involve regular progress updates and reports. Data and metrics focus on meaningful activities which lead to improved outcomes.

Focussing on a small number of priorities allows for targeted capacity building for those individuals working in these areas. These people can then become champions for wider culture change within the education system.

Communications and stakeholder engagement is key to successful implementation of the Delivery Approach as is ensuring that there is accountability throughout the education system.

The process of understanding delivery issues and blockages will involve stakeholders from across the system, from national down to school level. This links the centre of government to real issues at local level. Data and metrics can then be used to make targeted and impactful front-line visits to further strengthen understanding.



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Further reading

1. Barber, M., [The origins and practice of delivery](#), McKinsey Voices on Society Vol.5, The Art and Science of Delivery, 2013.
2. Gonzalez Asiz, M. & Woolcock, M., [Operationalising the Science of Delivery Agenda to Enhance Development Results](#), World Bank Group, 2015.
3. Hymowitz, D., [Too much science, not enough art](#), Tony Blair Africa Governance Initiative, 2016.
4. Shostak, R. et al., [When Might the Introduction of a Delivery Unit be the Right Intervention?](#), 2014.
5. Todd R. & Attfield, I., [Big Results Now! in Tanzanian Education: Has the Delivery Approach delivered?](#) 2017.
6. Todd, R.; Martin, J. & Brock, A., [Delivery Units: can they catalyse sustained improvements in education service delivery?](#), 2014.
7. World Bank Group, [Facing Forward: Schooling for Learning in Africa](#), 2018.
8. World Bank Group, [GET Note: Center of Government Delivery Units](#), 2010.

List of Acronyms

| | |
|-------------|----------------------------------|
| BRN! | Big Results Now |
| AGI | Africa Governance Initiative |
| EGRA | Early Grade Reading Assessment |
| ESA | Eastern and Southern Africa |
| ESP | Education Sector Plan |
| GPE | Global Partnership for Education |
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| PMDU | Prime Ministerial Delivery Unit |



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