

External Aid in Elementary Education

A Double-Edged Sword

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If externally-aided projects in elementary education remain outside the system, as they are tending to be, what purpose do they serve in the long run? Structures created to implement donor-aided projects should not be allowed to become contentious issues in educational administration.

TILL the mid-1980s the government of India did not reach out to external funds for elementary education. The first elementary education project to be funded by an external donor was the DFID supported Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Project (1986) followed by the Sida-assisted Rajasthan Shiksha Karmi Project (1987). It can be safely argued that the National Policy on Education of 1986 reopened the debate on external funding. It was during the Rajiv Gandhi era when P V Narasimha Rao was the minister for human resource development that the government took a decision to invite external funding in elementary education. Since then there has been no looking back. An interesting range of special projects were introduced with external funds between 1987 and 1995, namely (1) Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Project with British ODA support in 1986 (in 1992-93 this was subsumed under DPEP) (2) Rajasthan Shiksha Karmi Project with Sida support in 1987 (Swedish aid withdrawn in 1998 after the nuclear tests) (3) Mahila Samakhya (Education for Women's Equality) was launched in Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh with Assistance from the Netherlands in 1988-90. (4) Bihar Education Project with UNICEF support in 1990, later subsumed under DPEP (5) Uttar Pradesh Basic Education Project with World Bank aid in 1991 later subsumed into DPEP. (6) Rajasthan Lok Jumbish with Sida support in 1992 (Swedish aid withdrawn in 1998 and the government is now in the process of negotiating support with DFID - the British overseas development corporation). (7) District Primary Education Project with World Bank loan and bilateral aid from DFID, EU and other bilateral agencies in 1993-94 (8) Joint UN System primary education initiative in 1996-97.

During 1992-97 external assistance in education contributed less than 5 per cent of the total of Rs 9,201 crore spent by the government (central and state) on elementary education. Of this a major

chunk of Rs 450 crore was in the form of loans from the World Bank. According to government estimates, during the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002) external assistance is estimated to increase significantly to Rs 4,300 crore of which the loan component from the World Bank is Rs 3,700 crore. The Eighth Plan outlay (1992-97) of externally-aided projects in the elementary education sector was Rs 613.62 crore as compared to that in the Seventh Plan (1987-92) which was a modest Rs 8.62 crore. Projectwise expenditure during the Eighth Plan was as follows the table. In addition to the above there are a few other small-scale externally-aided projects, namely, Population Education in Adult Education is supported by UNFPA and routed through the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT). Similarly, the UNFPA and UNICEF also support specific activities like training, material production, study tours and so on in India. However, this assistance is small and channelled to specific project components in different institutions in India.

The question that is rarely asked is the role of external resources in our effort to achieve universal elementary education. People working within the system - at the GOI level and in state government - say that a very large proportion of routine non-plan expenditure in education goes into salaries. The government does not have the resources to improve the quality of education. Therefore, important areas

like in-service training, school environment, infrastructure and so on continue to be neglected. On the other hand, people who have been watching the implementation of donor-assisted programmes say that these special programmes set up parallel structures and do not give the needed inputs to the mainline primary education system. With the exception of DPEP, which is designed to work with the system and improve the quality and outreach of primary education, most other 'special projects' have little influence on the mainstream Shiksha Karmi created an entirely new cadre of para teachers. However, given that it catered to children in remote areas where teacher absenteeism is high, most observers say that investment in a parallel structure is justified.

Another contentious issue is the management structure adopted to implement externally aided projects. It is interesting that almost all the donor-aided projects are implemented through autonomous societies registered under Societies Registration Act of 1860. In 1986-87 the governments of India and Rajasthan agreed to set up a society called Shiksha Karmi Board to implement the Swedish-assisted innovative education programme. This government-sponsored NGO was registered under the Societies Registration Act, almost like any other NGO in India. There was, however, one significant difference. The formal head of the society is the education secretary of the state. This structure, it was hoped, would provide the flexibility and openness of NGOs along side the outreach, legitimacy and authority of the government. Funds meant for the project would be 'safe' and not absorbed into the general treasury account of the state. Given the perceived inflexibility of mainstream structures, this was also seen as a necessary mechanism to reach out to children in remote areas through paraprofessional teachers and to mobilise girls. It was argued that relaxing rules for recruitment and organising intensive ongoing support and training would not be possible within the rigid formal school system. And even if the formal system can accommodate

TABLE. EIGHTH PLAN (1992-97) OUTLAY AND ACTUAL EXPENDITURE

(Rs in crore)

Name of Project	Approved Outlay	Actual Expenditure
Rajasthan Shiksha Karmi (Sida)	35.00	29.41
Rajasthan Lok Jumbish (Sida)	90.00	63.93
Bihar Education Project (UNICEF)	118.00	58.96
Mahila Samakhya (Netherlands Government)	51.00	18.44
U P Basic Education Project (World Bank)	1.00	0.20
South Orissa Project (Source not available)	5.00	0.20
District Primary Education Projects (Multiple Sources)	230.00	512.99
Total	530.00	683.33

Source: Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.

'para teachers' (as it is being done under the Education Guarantee Scheme in Madhya Pradesh), administrators were wary of cadre formation and unionisation. Societies provided a 'nice halfway house'

The Rajasthan Shiksha Karmi Board set a new precedent. Subsequently almost every donor-aided education project and even the total literacy campaign (which is not externally assisted) adopted this structure. The government set up registered societies under the formal leadership and control of the civil service (education secretaries or district collectors). Empowered committees were constituted with nominees of the state government, the government of India and sections of civil society. The World Bank-assisted District Primary Education Project (DPEP) also adopted this model. State-level societies manage the programme. In some states there are also district-level societies. However, there are variations across states, with the decision to establish district-level societies left to the state governments. A specialised unit manages DPEP at the GOI level. Educational Consultants India (a GOI corporation) is used to hire project consultants and experts. For all practical purposes these societies are controlled by the formal administrative system, with their autonomy limited to the flow of funds and in some cases, recruitment policies.

FLEXIBLE STRUCTURES

Officials who created these structures argue that bypassing the mainstream was necessary to ensure greater flexibility on the one hand and tighter financial control on the other. Smooth flow of funds, greater flexibility, genuine decentralisation and appointment of committed people (not just experienced people) make a difference. They also say that as long as mainstream systems remain rigid, the government cannot but create autonomous structures. Bypassing the main artery becomes a necessity when it is clogged, atrophied or fossilised.

How does this structure interact with the mainstream? Experiences of different state level structures reveal a disturbingly mixed picture. While innovation, flexibility and responsiveness are hailed as the hallmark of these structures, they essentially remain outside the mainstream. For example, the Mahila Samakhyas (implementing the Dutch-assisted women's empowerment programme) in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh have been able to reach out to poor rural women and involve them in empowering the educational processes. The interaction of these structures with

the mainline education department is minimal, even though the education secretary of the state is the chairperson of the society. They are islands of sorts. Similarly, the Lok Jumbish and Shiksha Karmi (both formerly Swedish-assisted programmes) projects have also managed to initiate painstaking processes to reach out to their target population, the very poor.

Reportedly these special projects have been able to create a different work culture. Monitoring mechanisms are tight and officials working in these projects admit that accountability to the donor makes a difference. Liberal systems for travel and other allowances go a long way in motivating workers. The flip side is that there is also greater scope for 'misuse' of flexible procedures - especially in appointing support organisations, subcontracting project-related work, hiring consultants, authorising foreign travel and so on. Officers in externally-aided projects travel abroad, have access to vehicles and are governed by more liberal rules. Unfortunately, these facilities create imbalances, creating jealousies and even pits them against workers in the formal system. There have been cases where mainline administrators create financial and other bottlenecks when they feel that the 'goodies' are not shared or believe that proper procedures are not being followed for awarding sub-contracts.

There is also the problem of ownership. In some projects the leaders claim that their work is unique and different. Constant comparison with the 'ineffective mainstream' alienates officials working in the main system. This could threaten the very survival of special projects. Some observers argue that creating a sense of ownership, especially in the mainline primary education system, is not seen as a priority in some projects. Uniqueness, innovativeness, charisma or brilliance of project leaders and its identity as being 'different' ultimately pits it against the mainstream. Some special projects are totally identified with their leaders and the achievements (however valuable) of people down the line gets little visibility. As a result, donors and officials in the mainstream are made to believe that one particular kind of leadership is necessary for success. Ordinary, run-of-the-mill civil servants cannot be substitutes for dynamic and creative leadership. It is indeed unfortunate that we in India are particularly vulnerable to this style of leadership and management. Be it political parties, NGOs or special programmes, the primacy of the leader over the 'idea' and charisma over systems are indeed disturbing trends.

In such situations, conflict between the mainline and the special projects precipitates when there is a change of government and the new incumbent (civil servant or political leader) want to renegotiate the relationship between the society and the government. The nomination of new people to the empowered committee, finding space for supporters, demand for greater financial accountability or use of the project funds to announce special programmes - all these become contentious issues. What is the net result?

If externally aided projects remain outside the system and fail to make a dent in the mainstream education bureaucracy, one has to ask whether India really needs such structures. If external aid is being harnessed to improve outreach and quality - then sustainability issues have to be addressed seriously. If the structures created to implement donor-aided projects become contentious issues in educational administration, then the government and the donors have to take serious note of it. In the last five years, almost all the donors insist on autonomous structures to implement projects in other social sectors. The World Bank and other important donors working in India appear to have taken a policy decision to promote autonomous societies.

The time has come to pool national experience and undertake a serious review of autonomous societies. If autonomy really helps in implementing donor-aided social sector programmes then existing societies should be made genuinely autonomous, and there should be no scope for day-to-day administrative and political interference. Making societies genuinely democratic and transparent could help us address issues related to leadership and control. This is of particular importance when it comes to financial accountability and transparency in procedures for making grants, recruitment and awarding contracts. On the other hand, if our experience has not been good, we should find some other mechanism to assure bilateral and multilateral donors and the World Bank that project funds will be safe. Creating a facade of autonomy and decentralisation helps no one - least of all the donors.

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