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Education Reforms in Sub-Saharan Africa: Paradigm lost? Jeanne Moulton, Karen Mundy, Michel Welmond, and James Williams. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002. 248 pp.

Using research on policy implementation, Moulton and her co-authors “examine how an emergent paradigm of education reform has been designed, debated, and implemented across sub-Saharan African countries.” (2) To illustrate how this paradigm has evolved, the authors draw upon empirical data from five country cases of education reform: Malawi, Uganda, Benin, Guinea, and Ethiopia. Their analyses attempt to answer questions on the usefulness and shortcomings of the education reform paradigm and offers valuable insight into funding agency assumptions and the often unexamined political context of education reform.

The authors cite findings from the 1988 World Bank study, “Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Policies for Adjustment, Revitalization and Expansion” as providing the impetus for reform. The study, which speaks to the “crisis and deterioration of African educational systems during the 1980s”, led to the initiation of broad education reform programs designed and implemented throughout the region over the course of the following decade. USAID soon “launched or extended” some twelve education programs under the Development Fund for Africa; the World Bank and other aid agencies developed broad reform programs of their own—sometimes in cooperation with one another, and often not. Viewed as the next logical step to structural adjustment programs, education systems were soon targeted for fiscal and technical reform, encompassing broad issues of administration, curricula, teacher training, and classroom materials (such as textbooks) in attempts to establish goals for improving conditions of equity, quality, and financial management.

Drawing on the work of McDonnell and Elmore, the authors analyze data within these five cases around a typology of policy instruments used by international donor agencies to effect reform: inducements; dialogue; transfer of official authority; mandates; and capacity building. Moulton and her co-authors develop a three-part framework for comparing reform across cases—focusing on the content, actors, and contexts of reform as various policy instruments were brought into play by donor agencies. This framework for organizing the analyses of findings was useful in understanding how reform was structured, implemented, and administered, as well as the political, economic, and social conditions that shaped reform. Noting in particular the strong influence of national politics and aid agency assumptions about policy development in relation to implementation, the authors describe how international funding agencies used a number of policy instruments to revitalize whole systems of education, with varying success.

Combining their analyses of individual reform cases, the authors conclude that some policy instruments fared better than others. Whereas dialogue proved helpful in all of the cases—providing opportunities for stakeholders to aid in policy development—inducements and mandates yielded mixed results. In the case of Benin, conditions on budgetary support from USAID to the government were not enforced in the early stages of reform; national officials

learned to ignore the aid agency's agenda, and mandates on spending were only successful when combined with added financial inducements. However, questions remained as to whether the transfer of central authority to more local levels of governance was successful in achieving overarching reform goals in most country cases. National politics often superseded reform goals, and local communities frequently received mixed signals regarding their involvement in children's schooling (Uganda); efforts to ensure universal free access to primary school led to overtaxed teachers and classrooms as enrollments swelled beyond existing capacity (Malawi).

In their conclusion, the authors bring three aspects of international education reform to light in perhaps the strongest section of the book. First, international development is political and reform can be a factor within that arena. National agendas can thus change suddenly and dramatically, altering reform or derailing it altogether. The Guinea case is an example of how political instability can lead to changes in leadership ultimately detrimental to reform (Guinea). Second, the authors emphasize the need to recognize the role of stakeholders in the policy process, "who will continue to negotiate priorities in a context of uncertainty." (211) Stakeholder involvement in all levels of policy is key, they say, to sustainable reform; the success of dialogue in establishing close relationships between donors and national partners is convincingly documented by the authors in this regard.

A third aspect of education reform noted by the authors is the donor tendency to see policy development as separate and distinct from its implementation. Yet policy is often re-shaped, even changed completely, in implementation.¹ This is perhaps the most important of the authors' findings, focusing their case-comparison upon a critical issue of international development and reform in education. Based upon long-standing assumptions in the field of development, reform programs are thus viewed as "generalizable", applicable in a given country context. Donors seem to need one "best" education solution for Sub-Saharan Africa, say the authors, in contrast to the competitive policy environment of the U.S. The authors seem to imply that this view toward policy hampers the success of international development initiatives in education reform.

On the whole, the book will be helpful to policy makers, international development agents, and partners interested in better understanding how reform policy is designed and enacted in the complex contexts of international development. However, some researchers might find the text wanting in terms of the organization and presentation of findings in two main areas. First, where the authors' analysis of systemic reform appears complete, well crafted, and insightful, presenting a brief summary of findings early on would have strengthened the text. Some readers, especially researchers, will likely want a synopsis of the major findings by the end of the introductory section to aid in understanding the authors' interpretation of case study data. Waiting until the conclusion section to present findings may seem logical or less prejudicial, yet this arrangement leaves the reader without any guiding reference point from which to judge independently the validity of the authors' conclusions.

The book's conclusions would also benefit greatly from additional documentation of data in support of the authors' findings, particularly from interviews and surveys; data collection methods should have been described in detail for each case to further strengthen the authors' conclusions. Some conclusions, such as those regarding aid agency assumptions about policy design and implementation seem to rely less upon case evidence and more on the authors' own experiences, as evidenced by the independent and individualist manner in which cases were written. While this collection of reform experiences is indeed valuable to improving understanding of systemic education reform in sub-Saharan Africa the authors would need to

provide clearer documentation of findings and data gathering methods to truly add to the research literature on international development policy.

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Note

1. This assertion is supported by recent policy research showing the complex ways in which actors such as teachers often shape, or change completely, reforms in implementation. In “Policy as practice: Toward a comparative sociocultural analysis of educational policy” (2001, Sutton and Levinson, eds.), contributing authors address the need to view policy design and implementation in education as far more fluid than commonly thought—as matters of “practice” rather than as distinct phases of design and implementation.