Meeting EFA: How Do Complementary Models Meet the Education Needs of Underserved Populations in Developing Countries?

Conventional primary schooling methods have little chance of providing quality education to a high proportion of out-of-school youth and hard-to-reach children, especially in developing countries. Complementary education approaches that rely on community, nongovernmental, and ministry collaboration present a promising response to this challenge.

Complementary education entails schooling models that reach disadvantaged students who would otherwise not have access to education. The programs complement the formal public education system by offering children an alternative route to achieving the same learning outcomes as students in regular schools. In fact, complementary programs often feed previously excluded youth into the traditional public school system.

Civil society and other actors complement formal education systems by designing and implementing community-based education settings large enough to exhibit many of the same characteristics as mainstream schools, but usually at a lower cost per outcome. Community-based schools also increase communities' ownership of and dedication to education. While some materials, teacher training, textbooks, and curriculum come from other sources, local control and autonomy allow communities to effectively manage resources and respond to their own needs.

Lessons from complementary models address government interaction with communities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In some cases, governments offered NGOs public resources. In others, governments formed cost-sharing partnerships in which NGOs mobilized external funds and managed the program while governments contributed teacher salaries and materials. In some models, governments provided grants-in-aid to community-based schools. In all the cases, governments officially recognized the complementary programs as legitimate education models.

Data from nine case studies of successful complementary education programs in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Ghana, Guatemala, Honduras, Mali, and Zambia demonstrate that these approaches can effectively reach and educate otherwise underserved populations in various geographical, political, and social contexts. Community-based programs have been shown to provide access to target populations and achieve higher rates of completion and learning than the public systems in their respective countries. Four factors contribute most to their success:

• Locally recruited teachers and ongoing, regular supervision and training;
• School-based decision making and community-based management and governance;
• Smaller schools established in collaboration with communities; and
• Simplified curriculum devoted to basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Although insufficient capacity, political controversies, misguided local decision making, and conflicts among partners or constituencies can derail complementary education efforts, well-structured supervision, support, management, and accountability ensure effective community schools that increase access, completion, and learning among a country's most disadvantaged populations.

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For more information about EQUIP2, please contact: