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Unbalanced progress

What political dynamics mean for education access and quality

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Key messages

- While millions more children in developing countries are in school than was the case at the turn of the millennium, there is growing awareness of a 'learning crisis', with many of those in school unable to meet basic standards. In addressing this, the role of power and politics has been relatively neglected in favour of more technical solutions, yet a deeper examination of the former can help to explain why gains in quality remain elusive.

- Our analysis shows how global and domestic conditions have conspired in many instances to create a 'perfect storm' that holds back quality improvements. At the domestic level, incentives can be skewed towards areas which are visible, targetable, and perceived to offer higher political rewards. At the global level, this has been reinforced through Millennium Development Goal targets and attention to what is more easily measurable.

- Harnessing political dynamics to better drive balanced education outcomes, particularly in terms of quality, will not be easy but more can be done. In addition to a strong post-2015 goal on quality, which may help shift incentives, learning from countries which have already made progress in overcoming common political barriers is key. This paper begins to explore this, drawing principally on case study research conducted as part of ODI's Development Progress project, bringing in other examples where relevant.

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Introduction

Over one hundred million more children in low- and lower-middle- income countries are in primary school than was the case at the turn of the millennium, nearly fifteen years ago. While a further 57 million still remain out of school, of equal concern is that this expansion of access has not been sufficiently matched with better learning outcomes: the 2014 Education for All Global Monitoring Report (EFA GMR) estimates that 250 million – more than one third – of 650 million primary school age children fail to make it to grade 4 and are unable to read, write or do basic mathematics (UNESCO, 2014).

Beyond failing children in realising their right to education, this 'learning crisis' has profound social and political consequences in terms of labour markets and livelihoods throughout the developing world. As youths make up an ever larger share of the population of many developing countries, there is now real concern about limited learning and educational attainment and the consequences of a large unemployed youth bulge.

As a result, improved learning outcomes are seen as increasingly important at a global level, with any post-2015 education goals almost certainly aiming not only to reach those still out of school but also to improve quality for those already attending.[1] This attention to education quality is welcome, but it is not new. Major global development frameworks have for decades included calls for better quality education, with EFA and its precursors setting out a comprehensive agenda toward meeting learning needs around the world.

Yet, especially in developing countries, 'getting children into class and keeping them there' has been a major focus and sign of success in past decades, not least driven by the education-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)[2] and quick wins in the abolition of fees for primary education in many countries. However, this confluence of a global agenda on universal enrolment paired with its popularity among parents (and voters) has seldom led to commensurate investments and reforms to ensure that the millions of newly enrolled students benefit from a quality education. This has allowed politicians in some countries to reap the gains of a generally popular measure without making the more difficult political and fiscal decisions to invest in quality measures across the education system.

Beyond politics, there are other equally valid reasons why progress in education quality has been difficult. From a practical perspective, improving quality tends to be more costly than, say, improving enrolment, with a perceived trade-off between keeping unit costs low and maximising learning achievement (Mingat, 2004; Lewin, 2008). Moreover, in terms of measurement, gathering data on learning outcomes is certainly more complex than enrolment, making it more difficult to measure quality improvements (Islam, 2010). This begs the question: after nearly 25 years of global education goals, what more is needed to achieve change, particularly in areas that have shown slower progress, such as quality?

This is currently the subject of lively policy debates. One common theme emerging is that more money and inputs alone won't be enough to address the scale of the challenge (Pritchett, 2013). Multiple approaches are therefore needed, along with wide-ranging debate on possible solutions. Only limited attention has thus far been given to the range of political, governance and institutional factors that shape how schooling is carried out and how outcomes are achieved. Drawing on evidence from case studies carried out by ODI's Development Progress project,[3] alongside conceptual analysis by ODI and the University of Birmingham (Harris, et al., 2014), this paper explores these factors and their interplay with the education sector in more depth. It should be noted that the scope of this paper covers only some of the ways that political factors can shape outcomes in education and focuses largely on the interaction between technical features of education as they intersect with political dynamics, rather than a broader array of political and sociological approaches. It aims to provide an initial framework, which can be further tested against other cases, for exploring how political incentives could be harnessed to better drive gains in education quality.

Following this introduction, the paper goes on to briefly review trends on education access and quality. It then reviews key work on the politics of education service delivery and, drawing on this, focuses on four central dynamics that influence education outcomes:

- the degree of political prioritisation of reforms
- the visibility and political returns of reforms
- access and lack of access to information about schooling
- patterns of demand and accountability.

The paper also introduces an emerging policy agenda on quality and draws together some main conclusions.

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1 In its report, the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (High Level Panel, 2013) recognises 'the need to focus on the quality of public services, as well as on access to their delivery' (p.3) and recommends that post-2015 goals 'should call for improving the quality of services' (p.14).
2 MDGs 2 and 3, respectively, emphasised access in the form of primary completion and elimination of gender disparities at all levels of education, but they did not explicitly address quality.
3 ODI's Development Progress had a first phase which produced case studies on overall progress in access to basic education in Benin, Cambodia and Ethiopia. A second phase has researched increased post-primary education opportunities in Kenya and Mongolia, improved education quality in Chile and Indonesia, and the links between political voice and basic services in Ghana (see developmentprogress.org).

A class at the Women's Center at Abu Shouk IDP Camp, North Darfur. Photo: UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran

Trends in access and quality

A closer look at education globally shows the severity of the gap in gains between education access measures and quality outcomes.[4] Major gains have been made in enrolment, even if there is still some way to go, but trends in quality have been much harder to monitor and measure. In part this reflects challenges with proxy indicators that offer inadequate information and direct outcome measures, such as assessment tests, that are limited in their scope and comparability.[5] Although quality measurement has been expanding over the past decade, it is a much less 'visible' area – it is harder in practice to discern the quality of teaching and learning methods than, say, the number of children present in a school.

In terms of access, substantial gains have been achieved in nearly all countries, albeit unevenly. The number of countries having achieved universal primary education (UPE) has grown from just 37 in 1999 (30% of all developing countries with available data), to 61 by 2011 (50%), and is expected to reach 68 by 2015 (56%) (UNESCO, 2014: 57). The number of out-of-school

Box 1: The cost of poor quality

The EFA GMR (UNESCO, 2014: 19) finds that the costs of 250 million children not learning reaches $129 billion per year, equivalent to 10% of current global spending on education. More broadly, work by Hanushek and Woessmann (2007) has assessed the economic impacts of gaps in learning outcomes between developing and developed countries. Their work finds that quality has a much more predictive power than access in determining the prospects of societies to grow equitably and sustainably. They find that individual earnings, the distribution of income, and economic growth may be more strongly related to learning outcomes than to completed levels of education.

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4   Despite often being discussed as separately, access and quality are closely related, as stated by the 2005 EFA GMR: 'the achievement of universal participation in education will be fundamentally dependent upon the quality of education available' (UNESCO, 2004: 28). Yet while the interrelation between access and quality is strong, in reality their measures tend to signal progress in one camp or the other, and thus lend themselves to analysis along these lines.

5   Some of the main international assessment tests in literacy, numeracy or science include SACMEQ, TIMSS, PISA, PIRLS, LLECE, PASEC, ASER, and Uwezo, some of which have been established in recent years.

children was reduced by almost half over this same time, from 107 to 57 million, although gains for girls, as well as children in sub-Saharan African countries and conflict-affected states, have lagged further behind (ibid.: 53). For lower secondary education, participation increased, with a Gross Enrolment Ratio growing from 72% in 1999 to 82% in 2011, with the fastest growth happening in sub-Saharan Africa (ibid.: 63).

Yet increasing the number of children in school has not translated into better learning. Of the estimated 250 million primary school age children unable to read, write or do basic mathematics, approximately 120 million have little to no experience of primary school and the remaining 130 million are in school but have not achieved minimum levels of learning (UNESCO, 2014: 19). Further analysis of available learning outcome data by the EFA GMR (ibid.) shows that in 21 of 37 countries in Africa, the Middle East and South-West Asia, less than half of children are completing primary school and learning the basics of literacy and numeracy. The World Bank (2011) has looked more deeply at this learning crisis, with a recent report finding cases of countries where 25-50% of students graduating from primary school were unable to read a single sentence when surveyed. Moreover, analysis by the Education Policy Data Center of 20 countries ranging from low to high income shows that in 7 of the countries less than half of children reach grade 5 and learn the basics of literacy and numeracy (Chaluda, 2014).

International assessment tests provide further corroborating evidence of this lag in quality. In the 2012 Programme for International Student Assesment (PISA) tests, it was found that no participating low- or low-middle- income country – except for Vietnam – scored in the top half of these tests, with most being well below the average score of OECD states (OECD, 2013).[6] Even against nationally developed standards, comparisons of national curriculum guidelines in many developing countries with actual levels of student skills and knowledge suggest poor performance (Glewwe and Kremer, 2006).

Drawing on data from the last two decades, trends show that it could take more than a century for many developing countries to reach current OECD achievement levels in mathematics, science and reading (Beatty and Pritchett, 2012). Thus, while there are concerns that progress on access has slowed in recent years, it seems that progress on improving learning outcomes never really got moving, albeit with some exceptions.

The politics of education service delivery

There is a growing literature on the political and institutional factors that can affect service delivery in education (World Bank, 2004; Grindle, 2004; UNESCO, 2008; Kingdon et al., 2014). A central theme of the seminal World Development Report 2004 – *Making services work for poor people* – was that accountability relationships are key for service delivery (World Bank, 2004). This report put forward a model of three types of accountability relationships: namely, between citizens and politicians or policy-makers (in the 'political marketplace'), between policy-makers and service delivery providers (via 'provider compacts') and between providers and users (the so-called 'short route' of accountability). Importantly, this report also emphasised that the technical characteristics of services can themselves shape these accountability relations.

Recent work has continued to look in more detail at some of these factors and to explore a number of core challenges for how education systems and institutions operate. Pritchett's work, for instance, highlights challenges where school systems are highly centralised, and controlled by large, top-down bureaucracies which can carry out defined logistical tasks but which may be ill-suited to the approach needed to ensure sustained learning in many countries: 'a centralized system cut off from the judgment and concern of local parents and teachers is doomed to succeed at schooling but fail at education' (Pritchett, 2013).[7]

Building greater understanding of how large school systems operate within a political landscape is likely to be important for making sustained advances for education quality globally. Within these systems are a range of different stakeholders, who face a number of incentives and motivations which shape their decisions and actions. These stakeholders have multiple connections with each other – including forms of accountability relationships, such as those between politicians and a Ministry of Education, or between teachers and learners. The incentives of these different groups, and the nature of the relationships and power balance between them, can be hugely significant for determining how, and how well, these systems operate.

Recent joint work by ODI and the University of Birmingham explores how some of these issues affect the delivery of services, including incentives, behaviour and institutional features. It has looked at these dynamics through two lenses: analysis of some of the common constraints and incentives in the broader governance environment that affect services (Wild et al., 2012) and assessment of those specific problems and opportunities that the nature of individual services may present (Mcloughlin

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6   Several upper middle income countries did better, including Chile, which graduated to high income in 2013, and some parts of China (still an upper middle income country), with Hong Kong and Shanghai scoring well above average. Also, it is important to note that the sample of participating non-OECD countries is small, with only 7 countries. This is thus not a representative sample.

7   Moreover, Pritchett points to particular challenges for developing countries where international best practices have been promoted that do not adequately confront the contextual specificities, whether for pedagogy or for motivating teachers and users. Instead, this may have encouraged forms of 'isomorphic mimicry' – that is, where developing countries superficially 'imitate' systems that were successful elsewhere, without undertaking deep-rooted reforms really needed to develop functioning systems of their own (Pritchett, 2013).

> **Box 2: Common governance constraints for service delivery**
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> Some commonly identified governance constraints are set out below and will impact on how services are delivered, and levels of access and quality (Wild et al., 2012). They include:
> - Credibility of political commitments: whether promises made by politicians to provide services are seen as credible or believable by voters. Where they are not, clientelistic or identity politics might be stronger.
> - Levels of 'rent seeking': whether stakeholders can access additional income for goods and services (including bribes, market access privileges, etc.).
> - Strength of oversight and coherence of policies: including how clearly defined are roles and responsibilities, and whether performance is monitored and sanctioned.
> - Local problem solving and collective action: whether different stakeholders can collectively solve problems or come together to help deliver and maintain services.
> - Moral hazard: whether some stakeholders do not take action because they feel others will do so for them.

with Batley, 2012; Batley and Harris, 2014). Analysis of common constraints, which can affect all basic services, identified features of the wider governance environment that can impact on how, and how well, services are delivered (Wild et al., 2012), summarised in Box 2.

Harris et al. (2013) identify a set of four types of technical characteristics that influence the politics of education service delivery, drawn largely from economics literature. These are reproduced below:

- Nature of the good being produced: can the market deliver the service or does it require public intervention?
- Market failure characteristics: what is the rationale for public intervention?
- Task related characteristics: how does the way in which the service is produced and delivered affect relationships of control and accountability?
- Demand characteristics: how does the nature of the service provided affect the form of user demand and provider control?

A complete analysis of these characteristics is set out in Mcloughlin with Batley (2012) and Batley and Harris (2014). Combinations of these characteristics have effects on the relationships between stakeholders – for example, they can shape whether and how politicians or users can hold service providers to account, or whether collaboration and collective action between different stakeholders is possible.

These characteristics also matter in terms of the balance of power between different actors involved in service delivery. For example, service providers can dominate where there are monopolies, or a strong professional cadre, or where they can form professional groups or unionise. Finally, these characteristics shape whether and how citizens mobilise collectively to make demands on services.

Four key political dynamics and effects on education

In this paper we focus largely on the interaction between the technical features of a sector – in this case education – and political dynamics (Mcloughlin with Batley, 2012; Batley and Harris, 2014). These interactions seem particularly relevant to better understanding common trends and challenges that occur time and again in different countries, as this interaction between the technical and political has been relatively under-explored. This paper provides some preliminary analysis, highlighting where a number of these issues seem particularly prominent, focusing on four main areas:

- The political prioritisation of education: the extent to which governments and political leaders prioritise education over other sectors.
- The visibility and resulting 'political returns' of some activities: whether some particular activities or outputs within the education sector may be perceived as offering higher 'political returns' or rewards than others.
- Information access and information asymmetries: whether there are particular imbalances and gaps in information within the education sector, and whether some groups or stakeholders face particular information barriers.
- Patterns of demand and accountability: whether and how users can mobilise collectively to make demands for service delivery and hold decision-makers to account.

These factors seem to be significant, intersecting with how school systems operate, and are discussed in turn in the following sections. While all of these areas are closely linked, it is important to note they each also make a distinct contribution. For instance, a service may be visible, but not measurable, or may be measurable but only to

those with access to information. Moreover, the political power of different groups – such as teachers' unions and parent–teacher associations – lead to differing perceptions of demand, and often affect political prioritisation.

1. Political prioritisation of education

As an issue that affects a huge number of voters directly and speaks to universal experience, providing more and better schooling has emerged as a priority for political leaders in multiple contexts. Moreover, education often has perceived links to nation-state formation – for instance, where a common education can coalesce citizens around shared language or other markers of identity (Gellner, 1965). The prominence of education in a political agenda can in turn be an important role in driving progress in the sector.[8]

In reality, political prioritisation of education can look very different in different settings. In some countries, particular aspects of education may receive priority: for example, adult literacy in Brazil or Cuba, skills development in Germany, or non-formal education in some Pacific countries. It is rarer for mature countries to prioritise the education sector or the provision of education services as a whole. In addition, the circumstances of a federal state such as India or Nigeria can give rise to variable patterns of education prioritisation across the country.

Analysis of a select number of cases suggests that a focus on education can be particularly prominent during *political transitions* around elections or following a crisis or conflict (UNESCO, 2012). During Kenya's 2002 presidential election, incumbent Mwai Kibaki's promise of free primary education helped gain him large numbers of undecided voters and the subsequent abolition of primary school fees contributed to a significant expansion in primary access; the net enrolment rate increased from 61.8% to 74.2% from 2002 to 2003 (Glennerster et al., 2011). Similarly, following the end of Taliban rule, Afghan leaders prioritised primary education, particularly for girls, garnering support from those who had opposed the Taliban as well as the broader international community (Sigsgaard, 2011). In Benin, following the economic and political crisis in the 1980s, which led to a new constitution that made primary education compulsory, student enrolment increased fourfold between 1989/90 and 2008/09 (Engel, Cossou and Rose, 2011).

Education may also have a raised profile when a regime is focused on *consolidating power*. In Ethiopia, within the fragile environment of the early 1990s, political leaders saw the implementation of pro-poor education reforms as a means of broadening their power base.[9] At this time, the new government's top-level leadership saw education as a central pillar of the post-war nation-building project, with the sector inextricably linked to broader poverty reduction and rural development efforts (Brown and Teshome, 2007). In Ghana, two political parties have prioritised education quite differently due to their power bases, with the New Patriotic Party seen as the pro-private-sector party of the middle classes, emphasising quality, and the Provisional National Defence Council, with their strength among poorer groups, focusing on expansion of enrolment (Little, 2010: 29).

The role of political prioritisation can also be seen in Chile, as part of a *nation-building* exercise. Consensus around education policy in Chile in the 1990s and 2000s – which fed into later improvements in education quality (albeit not equitably) – was based in part on a belief that improving education outcomes and skill levels was key to ensuring Chile's competitive advantage in a globalised economy (OECD, 2004), and formed a central part of political platforms following the end of Pinochet's rule.

In each of these cases, the increased political prioritisation of education has played a role in driving progress in the sector. Yet not all aspects of the sector were prioritised equally; instead, it often meant a focus on enrolment, as part of commitments to expand primary education. In many of these cases, political announcements of fee abolition – usually timed in the run-up to elections – were made without any planning within education ministries who frequently were unaware of the policy change until the announcement (World Bank and UNICEF, 2009). While Liberia has not fullly abolished fees, it provides a stark example where political prioritisation has translated to improved access, yet quality remains abysmal: not a single one of the 25,000 students who sat the Liberia University entrance exam in 2013 passed (Smith, 2013).

These dynamics have been reinforced at the global level too. In some countries, international frameworks such as the MDGs and EFA have influenced political priorities, by way of either domestic aspiration or donor conditionality. In Cambodia, following the peace agreement, EFA principles were seen as integral to the new 1993 Constitution. Later, following a comprehensive assessment in 2000, a Sector-Wide Approach was established with extensive involvement of development partners. A push for UPE, in line with the MDGs, was particularly strong as part of this framework (Engel and Rose, 2011b). The high visibility of UPE and the clear levers for implementation, and particularly the construction of schools, alongside the focus on access as part of the MDGs, has reinforced tendencies towards more measurable and tangible results, rather than investments in teacher recruitment and training or learning materials. This may have been reinforced too by the availability of data that focuses much more on access, retention and inputs than on learning outcomes.

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8   This political prioritisation has often been reinforced by the broader international community – through global commitments such as the MDGs – and their emphasis by donors at the country level.

9   This aligns well with assumptions that the provision of positive state functions – including basic services like education – plays a central role in the establishment of state legitimacy (DFID, 2010).

These experiences reflect the political imperative to use education reform in order to demonstrate a new order or consolidate existing rule, and to do so in ways which are visible to the broader population. They show how politically tempting it is to prioritise tangible, visible reforms (such as numbers of children in school) over more complex and less visible improvements in quality. However, an important distinction regarding political prioritisation is highlighted by Kingdon et al. (2014) in their rigorous review on the political economy of education. While national-level prioritisation is crucial for successful reforms, there must also be aligned incentives for political actors and authorities at the sub-national level, particularly where there has been considerable decentralisation of authority. National drives to improve standards or increase budgets with the aim of raising education standards may well be undermined if local political priorities concentrate on securing short-term electoral gains or the construction of patronage networks, as is explored in the following sections.

2. Relative visibility and 'political returns' of different interventions

Closely related to issues of political prioritisation are the incentives for individual politicians to ensure the provision of services, which may often be tied – in democratic systems – to perceptions of whether improvements in those services will offer political (including electoral) 'returns'. Some have suggested that this type of 'political salience' may be one of the key determinants of prioritisation (Mcloughlin with Batley, 2012). In other words, whether politicians are motivated to ensure services are delivered may depend on the level of 'return' they feel it offers – especially whether it will help them to be elected or re-elected.[10] Perceptions of returns can be shaped by the nature of party and political systems, but they can also be shaped by the nature of the service itself (ibid.).

The perceived 'political returns' to improving schooling systems can be linked to how easily politicians can claim credit for a particular output, or whether citizens will associate improved outputs/outcomes with politicians' performance (i.e. how visible the outputs are). Areas which are more complex, and where it is harder for citizens to discern the role of government in producing them (i.e. which are less visible) may be seen to offer lower political returns (Mcloughlin with Batley, 2012). For example, adult literacy programmes tend to have very low levels of visibility and are rarely prioritised.

In education, we can see this play out where certain aspects of education are more visible than others. One area that is particularly visible is *school construction*, which can be linked to issues of enrolment and efforts to increase access. In Ethiopia, as part of the effort to strengthen the regime, as discussed above, there was a heavy reliance on

school construction and on visibly expanding reach to more remote areas of the country. The number of primary schools in operation increased by over 140% between 1996/97 and 2008/09 (almost 13% per annum), and more than 80% of the almost 15,000 new primary schools were in rural areas (Engel and Rose, 2011a).

Kingdon et al. (2014) also highlight considerable evidence for the prioritisation of visible and tangible outputs in education policy-making in their review. They highlight that school construction and teacher hiring are areas of high return, particularly in the context of political systems that operate with high levels of patronage and clientelism. Keefer and Khemani (2005) note examples from parts of India where voters or clients do not believe that politicians will be willing to focus time and resources on the long-term policies needed to improve education, and instead focus demands on short-term benefits, such as a new school in their area or a relative appointed to a teaching position, that are highly tangible, immediate and which politicians can be relied on to deliver.

Arguably, *school fees* also have elements of visibility. Their abolition is often a significant driver of expansion in enrolment, can offer high political returns, and is something that political leaders can take credit for. This is likely to have been a key factor for a number of African countries that abolished school fees in the early 2000s, with Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania and Burundi abolishing fees in this period (World Bank and UNICEF, 2009). Experience shows that while it proved relatively easy to abolish fees, tougher decisions on how to maintain reasonable class sizes and finance education sustainably in the long run were often overlooked, sometimes undermining future provision and overall parent confidence in the system.

The provision of new *teaching-learning materials* in the form of textbooks and other items can also be visible markers of the state's investment in education – this time, one that potentially does contribute to quality. El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua have all pursued targeted policies for the provision of free textbooks to politically important but disadvantaged regions (UNESCO, 2008: 42). The distribution of computers and ICT systems similarly creates another highly visible signal of a modern education system (Glewwe et al., 2011). In the Western Cape Province of South Africa, 9,000 teachers and 300,000 learners have benefitted from the Provincial Education Department's provision of 12,000 computers in both primary and secondary schools (Wagner et al., 2005: 39).

While these types of visible interventions may have elements that support both greater enrolment and improved quality, on balance they seem to contribute more extensively to gains in the former. Highlighting these dynamics is not to suggest that these visible inputs are unimportant for quality improvements – they are a key

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10 However, this may also incentivise targeting particular constituencies, regions or ethnic groups, thereby increasing existing inequalities.

A child practises his writing during a kindergarten class in Tachilek, Myanmar. Photo: UN Photo/Kibae Park

component – but their visibility and the links to perceived political returns can help explain why resources can be skewed towards particular areas and activities over others.

3. Information access and asymmetries

Education, then, can be accorded high political priority, and some elements of provision – those which are visible and targetable – can offer higher 'political returns' than others. Yet information access can also play an important role in determining which areas of education are focused upon, with issues in terms of both who has access to information (and who doesn't) and how that information is used.

Parents, for instance, may have only limited information on education systems, and some aspects will be much more visible than others to them. While they will be aware when a school has been built and if their child is attending (or at least enrolled), in contrast, it is much harder for them to monitor teacher activity within the classroom or to evaluate whether their child is learning at the pace that they should be. This is particularly the case for parents who may lack reference points and knowledge of education – such as those who have attended little or no formal schooling themselves or are illiterate. They may also have low expectations of the potential of their child, particularly in environments where there are few educated people and exposure to role models from

similar backgrounds is limited or where the returns from education (in terms of employment) are seen as low. By implication, this reinforces the previous point regarding greater demand for these more visible outputs.

Systems for *monitoring teacher performance*, such as minimum standards for schools and teachers, provide a potential mechanism for overcoming these issues by making learning outcomes more visible. Creating these systems, however, is challenging. Politicians may try to evade blame for poor performance by opting for artificially low standards, attempting to limit year-to-year comparability or restricting access to outcome information. Equally they may be wary of conflict with teachers' unions, discussed further in the next section, where such unions are large and well-organised. Grindle (2004) notes that reforms emphasising performance evaluation are often met with fierce opposition as they threaten established actors, particularly teachers. This dynamic is particularly evident in the case of Indonesia and is explored in Section 4.

That said, there are a number of teacher monitoring systems that focus on teacher attendance rather than performance. One example of where this has had positive outcomes is in the EDUCO (*Educacion con Participacion de la Comunidad*) programme in El Salvador, which directly involved parents and community groups in

monitoring schools and which reportedly led to lower teacher absence and fewer school closings (Sawada and Ragatz, 2005). In another case, in rural India as a part of an effort to better incentivise teacher attendance, a successful intervention evaluated through randomised control trials used both financial rewards and cameras to verify attendance (Duflo et al., 2012). However, while government and parents have an overlapping interest in teacher behaviour, parents are arguably in a position where they can at least monitor teacher attendance easily.[11] Moreover, overall examples of successful parent monitoring schemes and processes are relatively rare, and often pose questions in terms of scalability.[12]

Actors within government interested in promoting education quality can also use *learning assessments* to address information asymmetries for the population and to build political coalitions to support reforms. In Chile, during the Pinochet era, an independent and rigorous national assessment system, the SIMCE (*Sistema de Medición de la Calidad de la Educación*), was created to give parents information on the performance of their school (Wales et al., 2014). This was intended to put pressure on the education system to perform and to develop a market for education that would drive quality. In the democratic era, this strategy was maintained and augmented by regular participation in international assessment tests. Chile's poor performance in these tests was used by the government to boost support for continuing and investing in education reforms (OECD, 2004; Avalos, 2001).

Another promising model of *large-scale citizen-led assessment*, found with the Annual Status of Education Report in India and Uwezo in East Africa, involves testing student competencies and publicising findings to create broad awareness, debate and momentum for change. A study by Save the Children (2013) highlights the potential of these and other examples of 'short' accountability relationships between service providers and citizens in strengthening the quality of public education. This has in some cases begun to overcome the constraints listed above by directly involving parents in the assessment process and providing information in ways which were widely accessible and understood.

Moreover, there are issues which are about more than measurability. A service may be measurable but only by those with access to information. Politicians and managers may be able to monitor teachers' performance, for example, but may have little incentive to do so or to pass information to parents. One of the underlying factors here is that teacher unions and professional networks can often permeate the political leadership and management of the sector. This can lead to a high level of 'professional dominance', discussed in further detail in the following section.

In sum, increasing access to information can drive improvements in both access and quality, but large information gaps and asymmetries often exist, especially between parents/users and service providers. In some countries, there have been efforts to overcome these, which have made education quality more visible to and easily understood by the wider population. Yet the potential for information to make a sustained difference will depend on the broader context, and on the strength of power and accountability relationships between different groups. We therefore look at patterns of user demand and accountability, before turning to some final conclusions.

4. Patterns of demand and accountability

The extent to which different groups – teachers, parents and students – can mobilise and make demands provides a fourth important dimension of our analysis. We look first at teachers' collective mobilisation before examining student and parent mobilisation. These dynamics of demand are also affected by broader external factors such as labour markets and school choice.

A key finding of the political economy rigorous review conducted by Kingdon et al. (2014) was that the *ability of teachers to organise* collectively stands in stark contrast to the low levels of mobilisation among parent groups. This, combined with fragmentation of parents as a group, means that teachers are often a more powerful constituency in terms of influencing education policy. The same review found that the large numbers, geographical spread, disruptive potential and mobilisation capacity (both financial and social) of teachers' unions can make them powerful political allies and can enable them to play an important role in patronage networks in many places. This power can be exercised both in negotiations between teachers' unions and politicians and through the presence of former teachers in legislatures with the implicit or explicit backing of teachers' unions. This form of professional dominance can undermine the ability of policy makers and of users to evaluate, monitor and sanction performance effectively. For example, there is evidence that these teachers' unions tend to focus on visible, tangible areas such as salary increases and teacher job security, rather than teaching methods and outcomes.

The Development Progress case studies in Chile (Wales et al., 2014) and Indonesia (Tobias et al., 2014) illustrate the operation of these dynamics and how they can be overcome or used to bolster reforms in some cases. In the case of Chile, over the course of a decade, a series of teacher incentive schemes based on student performance and rigorous performance testing and certification mechanisms were introduced, following significant negotiations, but with relatively little active opposition from teachers' unions. An element of this success was the systematic improvements in teacher salaries and working conditions that successive governments had secured since

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11 Supervision has typically been considered a human resource issue within the education sector, with reforms emphasising performance evaluation often met with fierce opposition as they threaten established actors and particularly teachers (Grindle, 2004).

12 In a broader systematic review of what improves teacher attendance in developing countries only one of nine studies on parental/community participation was positive (Guerrero et al., 2012: 36-37).

the transition to democracy. These were recognised as important measures in themselves to improve education quality, attracting more and better candidates into the teaching profession. They also created considerable goodwill inside the profession, paving the way for other reforms, which were introduced gradually and over time.

The case of Indonesia illustrates how very similar policies, strategies and motivations can have quite different outcomes in different contexts. As with Chile, in the period following the democratic transition there was a recognition that teachers' working conditions had to be improved to expand and professionalise the education workforce, and that this had to come alongside measures to raise teacher performance and standards. While the Ministry of Education was able to build a consensus on improving teacher working conditions across a wide range of important political actors, measures to introduce teacher certification and performance evaluation faced considerable resistance, including from teachers' unions. As a result, while some competency testing was introduced, low thresholds for passing and delays in implementation undermined the rigour of these mechanisms.

Alongside these issues of professional dominance and the mobilisation of teachers, we can examine *dynamics of user demand*. Education has certain features that would lead us to expect parent and student mobilisation: the use of education services is highly predictable and frequent (i.e. daily during term time), and education services are delivered through a school, which can often be a key point of contact and mobilisation in the community. This is in contrast to curative health care, for instance, which is much less predictable and irregular – i.e. it only matters once someone is sick – and may be provided through multiple points (a pharmacy, clinic, or hospital). These features of education can increase the willingness of parents and students to devote time and resources to build collective action, for instance through parent–teacher associations, school management committees, informal meetings at the school and so on (Harris et al., 2013).

However, strong demand and user accountability mechanisms can be weakened by a number of factors. The extent to which parents or students feel willing and able to challenge those in authority, even collectively, can be a significant factor. For instance, uneducated parents may face difficulties in challenging teachers who are both better educated and seen as important officials of the state. Parents may also have good reason to believe that action is unlikely to be taken in the event of complaints, which may contribute to the lack of functional parent–teacher associations and school management committees in some areas.

The nature of the broader context will be reflected here too: where citizens do not feel comfortable challenging or criticising those in power at the national level, this will weaken the potential for forms of user accountability at the local level. Kingdon et al. (2014) find that in general levels of parental organisation and collective action are low, with strong imbalances of power between teachers and citizens,

with the poorest groups often being least able to exercise voice, negotiate change or take advantage of innovations such as decentralisation or community-based management intended to improve accountability. Civil society groups are shown to be important in mobilising parents, but are most successful in countries with vibrant political cultures (ibid). The combination of these factors may therefore contribute to politicians prioritising policies that do not conflict with teachers' unions rather than responding to parents' and students' demands, given the high likelihood of political conflict and low likelihood of short-term political rewards should they chose to do otherwise.

A range of factors outside the education sector also shape patterns of user demand for education, though, and so may provide opportunities for reform coalitions to be created, although they may also stimulate demand for non-state provision if not acted upon. For instance, the *labour market and economic structure* of a society can be significant. In Mongolia, amid industrialisation and economic diversification, the penalty for failing to possess at least secondary education (and frequently tertiary) is high. This leads to greater demand for higher levels of education as individuals use university diplomas to signal their employability and qualification for skilled jobs, even if the quality of accredited universities varies greatly (Engel and Prizzon, 2014). Where perceived links to labour markets are not clear or meaningful, pressures for demand might be weaker.

Variations in the availability of *school choice* is another key factor affecting the dynamics of demand for education and shaping resulting behaviour. Where learners and parents are unhappy with the quality of education, and where they have the means to do so, it is both feasible and much 'safer' to take individual action (such as hiring private tuition, or exiting from the school altogether to a private school perceived to offer higher quality) than to push collectively for the reform of a school. This encourages politicians to turn a blind eye to addressing problems within the government-run school system. Where multiple schools are available and parents and/or students are unhappy with the quality of education, it is a broadly recognised phenomenon that they are more likely to exit these schools than to successfully change them (Day Ashley et al., 2014). Development Progress case studies in Kenya and Ghana have noted this as a widespread trend among parents in response to low quality in state schools (Nicolai et al., 2014; Rocha Menocal et al., 2014).

The long-term effects of greater school choice on public education are unknown, but there is concern that it may undermine political incentives to invest in public education systems and the ability of parents to monitor these systems effectively. Research in Chile has noted considerable socioeconomic segregation between municipal, private-subsidised and private-fee-paying schools (Wales et al., 2014). Some (see Pribble, 2013) have argued that this has led to the splintering of a potential political coalition for improving the quality of municipal education, slowing progress towards achieving high learning outcomes for all. Similarly, Verger

and Van der Kaaij (2012) note that, in the Indian context, faith in public education has been severely undermined and its decline has become a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' as more educated groups leave, and lower outcomes are registered as a result of the new mix of students.

Thus the option of exit and access to multiple schooling options may in some contexts be a double-edged sword, as it undermines political incentives for investment and reforms to improve learning outcomes for all. It can allow those who detect low quality to access alternative options and improve their individual position and, at least theoretically, may create competition and quality across the school system (Day Ashley et al., 2014). However, where those who are most likely to push for improvements (such as those with financial standing, higher levels of education and so on) opt out, it can undermine the capacity for collective action and for coalitions to push for widespread education quality at the school and system levels.

The previous section examined information challenges, especially for parents or users. Where parents or users are able to judge the quality of education received and are concerned by it, they can attempt to alter teacher or school behaviour. However, for the reasons discussed above they may have low expectations of change, and may thus opt for other choices, such as private schooling, to realise individual gains in quality. Moreover, there can be high levels of professional dominance, for instance through teachers' unions, that can take precedence over parent and student demands, influencing education agendas and undermining monitoring or other performance measures.

An emerging agenda toward greater focus on quality

Current education policy debates have brought attention to a long-standing challenge in the sector: improving quality across many parts of the developing world. This 'learning crisis' sits alongside a continuing challenge of access, which, despite gains, sees millions of children still excluded from school. Gaining traction in efforts to tackle these issues will require much more than a new, more comprehensive global goal. A closer look at the political dynamics driving change within countries is necessary. In this section, and in Table 1 overleaf, we look more closely at ways political dynamics could support a greater focus on quality.

Our analysis shows how global and domestic conditions have conspired to create a 'perfect storm' that can hold back quality improvements. At the domestic level, incentives can be skewed towards areas which are visible, targetable, and can be perceived to offer higher political rewards – and thus tend to favour a focus on access-related initiatives over quality. At the global level, this propensity has been reinforced through MDG targets and attention to what is more easily measurable. Too often, visible areas – such as school enrolment – have been given attention at the expense of those that are more complex and harder to measure, such as the quality of teaching and learning. While political

dynamics are not the only factor here – others include levels of resourcing, relative complexities of reforms and so on – they are a central piece of the puzzle, and have received less attention to date.

Many of the arguments in this paper are not new; there has been reflection on the role of politics, accountability, incentives over many decades. There have also been calls to focus greater attention on education quality for some time. But much of this discussion has been either overly broad – with vague references to the importance of 'political will' – or overly technical – focused on improving pedagogy or curriculums. Here, through a closer look at political analysis of sector characteristics and country examples, we have sought to provide a framework of how political dynamics interact with the education sector in some similar ways across a number of countries. Analysis of these recurring patterns can help us to understand what needs to change – and what could be better measured.

Harnessing these political dynamics to better drive education improvements, particularly in terms of quality, will not be easy. In many of the examples we have reviewed, these forces have either led to an emphasis on access or have been limited in scope in improving quality. That said, political dynamics are not fixed, and awareness of and engagement with them may reveal real opportunities. A few such promising prospects are mentioned here, as well as in Table 1 (overleaf).

- In terms of *political prioritisation* of education, a post-2015 goal that focuses on quality could help to support a re-balancing of focus and global leverage. Such a goal should be framed to measure progress not just against an absolute standard of quality, but also relative to previous performance levels. Domestically, this could be complemented by greater efforts to raise public awareness and interest in quality, for instance through non-partisan or cross-party coalitions favouring better learning outcomes, or through citizens lobbying for its inclusion on leading political party platforms. The politics of aid is at work here, for good and ill: for good in the sense that that agencies are increasingly highlighting progress in learning outcomes as an aim of their projects; but for ill in the absence of adequate capacity and in terms of the risk that failure to improve outcomes in a specified period may lead to the withdrawal of funds.
- Regarding *visibility*, one way to increase the profile of quality (while at the same time maintaining that of access) could be to include indicators of learning outcomes alongside more traditional access measures in monitoring systems. Better linking of capital and recurrent costs which support quality teaching and learning in budgets and campaigns may also make a difference. In addition, more systematic monitoring of what is more visible or politically salient in education in different countries, including how and when quality rises on that agenda, could help.

Table 1: Ways political dynamics can strengthen education quality

Political dynamic	Context	Typical effect	Opportunity to focus on improved quality
Political prioritisation of education	At times of political transition, i.e. election, post-conflict periods, amid moves to strengthen state legitimacy or nation-building efforts	Tends toward major political announcement, e.g. fee abolition, with impact on access. Also involves efforts to increase trust in government, e.g. through pro-poor sector reforms	• Global incentives for political focus on quality, i.e. post-2015 goal, which includes not only indicators on learning outcomes, but also on relative progress. • Raise public awareness and interest in quality/outcome measures, over input measures.
Visibility of policies and tasks	Focus is on visible areas, largely physical or financial, such as: school construction and infrastructure; populist policies (e.g. user fee abolition); or possibly additional teaching and learning materials	Increased numbers of schools and/or better facilities within schools, increased enrolment particularly in lower-income groups, higher textbook-to-pupil ratios or increased access to information and communications technology	• Link (visible) capital and (non-visible) recurrent costs, for instance in budgets and public campaigns. • Strengthen monitoring of providers with output or outcome measures rather than multiple input measures. • Support user involvement and monitor satisfaction.
Information access and asymmetry	Users can lack accessible information on quality improvements, in terms of both learning assessments and teacher or school performance	Users may find it easier to monitor some aspects of provision over others, for instance assessment tests not shared and monitoring of teacher performance not feasible. Seem to be limited attempts to address this, and not always successful	• Use new forms of measurement to highlight where quality is lacking and allow for national and international comparisons. • Involve users in assessment process, so more accessible to them. • Ensure genuine user representation within schools.
Dynamics of demand	Ability to make demands is shaped by user/provider and citizen/state relations. Other factors include economic structure, household expenditure, and school choice	Education has a high level of professional dominance, with teacher unions in position to make strong demands. In contrast, parents/students have both less information and less ability to form coalitions. Also, users can opt out when dissatisfied with quality, if they have sufficient means	• Teacher incentive schemes linked to student performance. • Support questioning by users of politicians' perceptions of salience, lifting the status of chronically weak areas. • Publish expenditure commitments and strengthen user monitoring of them. • Support campaigns that create awareness of crisis in neglected areas.

• Finding ways to strengthen *access to information* on both access and quality could also make a difference. Making learning outcomes more measurable and visible, including by directly involving users themselves, would be one step forward. This could include publicising results of learning assessment tests better to allow for national and international comparisons, involving users in assessment processes (as is already the case in some countries), and ensuring substantive parent and student representation within school governance. That said, there is an important debate to be had around the value added of involving low income countries in international assessments, particularly if the focus remains on absolute levels of learning outcomes, rather than relative gains. While some politicians may want to engage as a signal of being part of the global community, others may for understandable reasons believe the time is not right.

• *Demand* for improved quality could potentially be bolstered by supporting education coalitions or campaigns that build awareness, particularly in neglected areas. These should aim to reach out to those parents and students who currently do opt out, and who often come from more privileged or middle class backgrounds. Bringing them into coalitions for change is likely to be a crucial step in successfully arguing for better services for all. A look at how users are involved in decision-making feedback loops to providers would also be useful. In addition, publishing learning outcomes and expenditure commitments

and strengthening user monitoring of these could be useful. Monitoring trends in private schooling in the developing world, including research on how these affect public sector provision, will also be important.

Each of these political dynamics can shape incentives for different stakeholders – for politicians, for service providers and for parents and students. There are likely to be a number of other ways in which these forces could support better-balanced progress in terms of both access and quality, which this paper only has just begun to explore.

Conclusion

A better understanding of the different political drivers of progress – and the trade-offs they entail – is essential if we are to both extend access and improve learning levels in the future. This paper has drawn on broader work currently underway on the political incentives and governance constraints of service delivery that help to frame behavioural incentives that impact on the delivery of basic services. It explored some of the key political dynamics that affect education and how they can influence progress in access or quality. Its findings highlight that addressing this imbalance will require action at multiple levels – globally, domestically and in and around the classroom.

Country leadership and other stakeholders must lead the charge. Some countries have already made progress here, both those mentioned in this report and others, and it is important to learn from these examples. Our analysis points to the need for context-specific and locally adapted policy responses, which draw on a range of policy and organisational responses. What some of those might be are summarised in the previous section, from a perspective of

how to increase opportunities for quality-focused reforms. We hope this provides a useful prompt to thinking through political dynamics in different contexts.

Globally, much attention has been focused on including learning as part of the post-2015 sustainable development goals. It is important to ask, however, whether this more comprehensive goal is enough to spur a quality revolution. Our analysis suggests a measured approach is needed: while a new goal is not enough on its own, it could signal a shift in global political priorities that helps increase the political salience of quality improvements at the national level. It would do so in part by ensuring a greater focus on measuring learning outcomes for all countries, making education quality more visible and providing information that is more accessible globally and by parents and students.

Global attention is also being paid to the significant calls being made for increased funding for education, with a staggering global financing gap of an estimated $26 billion annually, after taking available domestic and donor funds (but not private finance) into account (Rose and Steer, 2013). While our analysis here did not directly explore the question of domestic budgets or international aid for education, it does illustrate that technical inputs and money for these will not be enough alone to address the 'learning crisis'. Alongside funding, we need to look much more carefully at how systems and institutions work, why people behave as they do, and at established formal and informal accountability relationships.

Given that a new goal will not be enough, and more money will not do the trick on its own, bigger questions around systems and scaling up are also capturing the attention of the education sector and those working on service delivery. Some of our future research will contribute to this important theme, with a particular focus on the political drivers that shape how different systems operate.

'A better understanding of the different political drivers of progress – and the trade-offs they entail – is essential if we are to both extend access and improve learning levels in the future'
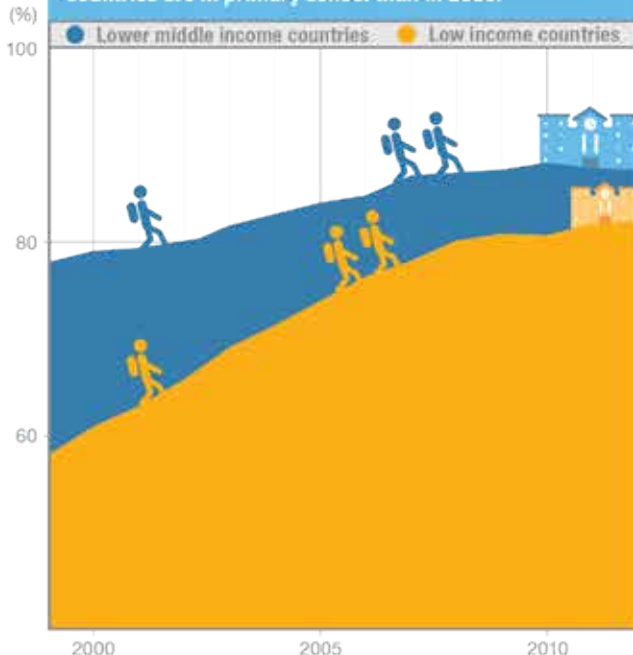
Unbalanced progress

How political dynamics lead to
differing gains in education access and quality

ACCESS IS GROWING...

Over one hundred million more children in developing
countries are in primary school than in 2000.

● Lower middle income countries   ● Low income countries

(%)
100
80
60

2000   2005   2010

...YET QUALITY LAGS BEHIND...

More than
1/3
are not learning
the basics

Out of **650 million** children of
primary-school age in developing countries,
250 million are not achieving minimum
benchmarks for learning.

...AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS FAVOUR THIS IMBALANCE

Politicians prioritise visible
outputs like fee abolition that
bring high returns.

It is hard for parents and
communities to monitor the quality
of education on offer.

Rather than pushing for reform, it
is often easier for parents to switch
their children to private education.

SO WHAT CAN
BE DONE?

Increase political
incentives to
prioritise quality
– such as a post-
2015 global goal.

Focus on measuring quality and
communicating outcomes to
parents and communities.

Support teachers, parents and
faith leaders
to mobilise
and call
for higher
quality
education.

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