

Advocacy Brief

Impact of Incentives to Increase Girls' Access to and Retention in Basic Education

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Introduction

The need to increase girls' access to, and retention in, basic education is widely accepted amongst policy makers and researchers. Many strategies are used to fulfil this need, including the use of incentive programmes.

A recent study focused on the main barriers to education for the poorest households in Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Uganda and Zambia. It showed that for all households (the poorest and the slightly better off), the direct and indirect costs of schooling were a great burden on households and, therefore, a significant barrier to education.¹

Thus, it is important that policy makers understand the costs of schooling to families and explore ways of reducing this burden in order to increase the enrolment and retention of girls in basic education.

This policy brief aims to explain what incentives are, outline current research on the impact of incentives, and summarize lessons learned for future policy development.

What are incentive programmes?

Incentive programmes are a direct response to cost analyses that study the expense to a family of sending children, especially girls, to school. Costs can be divided into direct costs of schooling (e.g. school fees, uniforms, shoes, school books and supplies) and indirect costs (e.g. opportunity costs where families cannot afford the loss of income or labour contribution). Both of these costs have a gender dimension. Where families have to choose between educating a boy or a girl, often a boy will be chosen in the belief that he is a better investment. Girls are more likely than boys to work in the home, to look after siblings, and to do household chores.²

- Flexible schooling is seen as one way of helping girls to manage an education and still be able to help in the home. A number of additional strategies have been attempted to encourage girls' school attendance: abolishing school fees altogether as in Malawi and Mauritius; raising awareness on the importance of girls' education; promoting poverty reduction strategies; and advocacy.

- Yet, increasingly, the quality of education in schools is also seen as an important aspect of attracting and retaining children. Authorities must ensure that classroom education is relevant and of good quality.

- Once families are convinced that schooling can benefit their children, incentives are key in helping families meet educational costs. Programmes cover a variety of interventions that are designed to reduce schooling costs, especially for girls, and thereby encourage out-of-school children to enrol in and stay at school.

- Incentives are generally aimed at encouraging parents, but are also designed to support girls in their education. Programmes can include:

- ▶ small scale scholarships
- ▶ subsidies
- ▶ food (for example, providing cooking oil or a mid-day snack)
- ▶ uniform allowances
- ▶ accommodation in hostels

- Incentive programmes are implemented in cases where it is believed that the cost of schooling is a significant (but not necessarily the only) barrier to girls attending school. They may be targeted at a certain geographical area or section of society, according to the needs of the girls and resources available.

1 Boyle, Siobhan; Brock, Andy; Mace, John and Sibbons, Mo. *Reaching the poor: The "costs" of sending children to school*. London: DFID, 2002, pxi.

2 UNICEF, *The Big Picture* http://www.unicef.org/girlseducation/index_barriers.html Downloaded 28/03/04

While all children might benefit from these incentives, in order to have a significant impact on the enrolment and retention of girls in school, the incentive programmes need to be targeted carefully at girls' needs.

How effective are incentive programmes in increasing the attendance of girls at school?

The verdict on the effectiveness of incentive programmes in increasing girls' school attendance is still out, though not for lack of study. A report from the Global Campaign for Education, for instance, examines the status of girls' education in nine African and Asian countries.³ The report describes mixed results from incentive programmes and, in particular, highlights the problems in targeting the 'most needy' children, especially in places where there are huge numbers of children who are deprived.

One programme that has shown clear results is the Food for Education (FFE) programme in Bangladesh. In its Global Monitoring Report,⁴ UNESCO notes that the FFE programme has served to increase enrolment and attendance for both boys and girls, but with greater increases for girls. FFE schools showed enrolment increases of 35 percent in the first year of the programme, in comparison to 7 percent in non-FFE schools. Furthermore, the girls' rate of enrolment increased by 44 percent, compared with 28 percent for the boys.

The UNESCO report also identifies successes through scholarship schemes that provide access to secondary education in Malawi and Bangladesh.⁵ The report describes the Female Secondary School Assistance Programme in Bangladesh, which requires parents to ensure that their daughter attends for at least 75 percent of the year, achieves marks of at least 45 percent, and remains unmarried throughout secondary school in order to receive the scholarship. In other countries, additional support by way of safe board and lodging for girls is included (for example, in Cambodia there is a programme to house girls with local female teachers).

The UNESCO report highlights the need for a range of supporting interventions suitable for the local community to ensure that scholarships are successful. This is particularly important because a number of other reports indicate that incentives may not be used in the way originally intended, and therefore, do not benefit the girls for whom they

were meant. A study into the effectiveness of incentives in Nepal,⁶ for instance, revealed that scholarships were not distributed to the girls most in need. Indeed, they were distributed according to political pressure from local leaders.⁷ There were also complaints that needy students were not receiving scholarships and incentives, and that nepotism and favouritism were pervasive in the distribution process.

Furthermore, scholarships were not sufficient to cover the cost of educational materials, and money was found to be misused. In fact, the amount of scholarship paid to girls attending primary schools was so small that it did not provide any incentive to families to send their girls to schools. The study estimated a direct cost of 1,819 Nepalese rupees (NPR), or 25 U.S. dollars (USD), and an indirect cost (opportunity cost) of 4,607 NPR (62 USD) to put a child in primary school. Combined, it cost a family a total of 6,426 NPR (87 USD) to put a child in primary school annually. The amount of scholarship given to a child in Nepal is 250 NPR (4 USD) per annum, thus covering only 5 percent of the total cost. Poor families who must rely on children's labour and income will not be prepared to release their children for schooling despite the provision of a cash incentive if the incentive is too small. The study further noted that due to the small amount of scholarship and high direct and indirect costs of schooling, families living in desperate poverty were not able to benefit from limited financial support or incentives provided by the government.

Experts believe that relevance and efficiency of incentives are required if they are to have their desired effects. Relevance refers to how well the incentives fit the needs of individuals, while efficiency has to do with whether the stimulus of the incentive is adequate to cause the desired behaviour. Judged from this framework, the incentive programme in Nepal was neither relevant nor efficient.

3 Swainson, Nicola. *A Fair Chance: Attaining gender equality in basic education by 2005*. Brussels: Global Campaign for Education, 2003.

4 UNESCO. *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4 Gender and Education for All: The leap to equality*. Paris: UNESCO, 2003.

5 Swainson, Nicola, *ibid.*

6 CERID. *An evaluation of the girls' education incentive programs*. Kathmandu: Center for Educational Research, Innovation and Development, 1999.

7 Miske, S.; DeJaeghere, J.; and Moore, A. *Beyond Access: Improving Educational Quality in FSSAP Schools of Bangladesh*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2000, pp28-30.

In Brazil, incentives were introduced to enable families to send their children to school by covering the loss of earnings from the children. However, the study⁸ found that the families became dependent on the money, and that the programme was therefore unsustainable in the long term.

What makes an incentive programme successful?

A number of factors that lower the effectiveness of incentive programmes include: poor targeting, lack of clear criteria and procedures for identifying needy children, lack of publicity about the incentive, too small amount of incentive, untimely distribution, and poor monitoring/follow-up.

In Nepal, scholarships are provided to those who are already enrolled in schools, and those who are outside the school system are never informed about incentives. Thus, existing incentives may have helped in the retention of children, but their effect on new admission and/or enrolment is minimal.

But the report from the Global Campaign for Education highlights a number of important lessons:

- ▶ clear identification of the target group
- ▶ transparent selection procedures established by local communities
- ▶ involvement of parents and community leaders
- ▶ affordable administrative costs
- ▶ offering of incentives at primary level to achieve higher rates of enrolment at secondary level

If EFA is to be achieved, incentives will need to be targeted at children who are outside the school system, too. This is not to suggest that those who are already in schools should not get support. It will be all the more important to target children already within the system and those outside the system simultaneously. Most importantly, the incentive programme must be designed to fit local circumstances. The process of designing, implementing and evaluating an intervention needs to involve in-depth consultation with local people. How effectively the incentives will be used depends on local cultural values and decision systems.

In some cultures, little value is attached to things if they are acquired without much effort, leading to irrational use of those things thus acquired. Furthermore, in cultures where children have little or no say in decision-making, cash incentives are often hijacked by parents or elders in buying alcohol, cigarettes or household goods.

- Studies have noted weak linkages between incentives and specific performance of behaviour expected from children receiving incentives. It is often not clear what minimum behaviours these children should demonstrate after receiving the incentives (e.g., regular attendance, grade promotion, etc.). It is no wonder that children sometimes come to school just to collect the incentives. Experience also suggests that cash incentives are more likely to be misappropriated than non-cash incentives.

A final note: Providing incentives is not enough

- It is vital not to stereotype the poorest as people who do not understand the importance of education and are not willing to pay.⁹ The Global Campaign for Education report states: *'There is a notable willingness amongst the poor to pay (although ability is often limited or non-existent), and to make sacrifices for what they perceive to be good quality education.'*¹⁰ The issue of incentives, thus, needs to be closely considered alongside the quality of education provided in schools. Parents make complex choices for their children and are prepared to make huge sacrifices for education they deem to be worthwhile. Incentives are not able to reduce many of the indirect costs to parents, and therefore, they can only be successful if the quality of education offered is good enough to persuade parents to shoulder the burden of the indirect costs of schooling.

- At times, poor pedagogical practices in schools discourage girls' participation. Frequent teacher absenteeism, lack of educational materials, discriminatory behaviours of teachers or peers, use of language that is alien to the language that is spoken at home, absence of female teachers, lack of teacher support to join and remain in school, lack of ability to meet the school's academic demands, poor quality of teaching, a poor learning atmosphere, etc. can offset the effect of scholarships or other incentives. One important lesson to learn from many country experiences is that an incentive-based approach to the promotion of educational access and retention should be combined with pedagogical and institutional reforms for effective and lasting impact. ■

8 Miske, S. et al, *ibid*.

9 Boyle et al, *ibid*.

10 Swainson, p. xvi.

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