

Title

In search for the right to education: the role of the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) in promoting access to education in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article explores how the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) contributes and assists orphans and vulnerable children in attaining education in their respective schools in Zimbabwe. BEAM is a national school assistance programme which was launched by the Government of Zimbabwe in 2001 to assist orphans and vulnerable

children. Financing of the programme mainly comes from the Government of Zimbabwe but also from the donor community. The discussion focuses on how BEAM is organised, how it is administered, its strengths and challenges. At the end, recommendations are made to improve and strengthen the program.

Key words

education, BEAM, enhanced social protection, orphans and vulnerable children, schools selection committee, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Education is development. It creates choices and opportunities for people, reduces the twin burdens of poverty and diseases, and gives a stronger voice in society. For nations, it creates a dynamic workforce and well-informed citizens able to compete and cooperate globally – opening doors to economic and social prosperity. This article explores how the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) contributes and assists orphans and vulnerable children in attaining education in their respective schools in Zimbabwe. BEAM is a national school assistance programme which was launched by the Government of Zimbabwe in 2001 to assist orphans and vulnerable children. Financing of the programme mainly comes from the Government of Zimbabwe but also from the donor community. The discussion focuses on how BEAM is organised, how it is administered, its strengths and challenges. At the end, recommendations are made to improve and strengthen the program

Background to BEAM

BEAM was launched by the Government of Zimbabwe in the year 2000. The programme was launched in response to worsening social conditions in the country that were causing the poor to suffer deepening multiple shocks (escalating prices of basic commodities, retrenchments and high unemployment rates, high drop outs of school children and high interest and inflation rates). The Enhanced Social Protection Project (ESPP) was targeted as a short-term social safety net aimed at alleviating irreversible losses to human capital in the areas of education, food security and health” (Government of Zimbabwe 2003). BEAM is indeed, the largest form of educational assistance in the country to date, along-side other interventions by the private sector, churches, Non-Governmental Organizations, individual families and communities.

BEAM was conceived as one of the five components of the Enhanced Social Protection Project (ESPP) on which all social protection strategies are anchored. BEAM is essentially a school fees assistance programme. The other four components of ESPPP include the Public Works Component, Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances Module, the Essential Drugs and Medical Supplies Component and the development of a longer-term Social Protection Strategy. In this regard, the approach by BEAM to focus on educational assistance alone was based on the broader vision that encompassed other social protection measures.

BEAM is a national programme that is being implemented in all 61 districts in Zimbabwe, and is operational in both urban and rural areas. Its main focus is the provision of educational assistance to orphans and other vulnerable children aged between 6-19 years. In brief, BEAM targets children in school but failing to pay fees, children who have dropped out of school and children who have never been to school. Its main support is in the form of payment of tuition fees, examination fees, building fund and school levies it excludes Uniforms which is also paramount to school regulations.

The primary objective of BEAM programme is “to reduce the number of children dropping out, and reach out to children who have never been to school due to economic hardships. Its main development objective is to prevent irreversible welfare losses for poor households who resort to perverse coping mechanisms, like withdrawing children from school in response to increasing poverty” (Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare 2005).

Beneficiaries of BEAM programme

There is a well-developed criterion of selecting children who should benefit from BEAM. The process of selecting BEAM beneficiaries is decentralized. It is done at the primary level and is spearheaded by Community Selection Committees; these are structures that were solely put in place to take charge of the process at the local level. There are also specific guidelines on who should be elected into the Community Selection Committee (CSC), and it is explicitly stated that local government leaders that include councillors and traditional leaders are not supposed to be part of the CSC. Further, at least 30% of CSC members are expected to be women. In principle, all potential BEAM beneficiaries are expected to complete a special form which is supposed to be used in guiding the selection process. Also, the CSC and other community structures are expected to monitor the implementation of BEAM (Government of Zimbabwe, 2003). Below are points or factors which are considered when choosing beneficiaries for BEAM:

- Children who have never been to or have dropped out of school due to economic reasons.
- School record of previous failure to pay fees and levies.
- Consideration for employment status of the head of household.

- The health status of the bread winner/head of household.
- Orphaned status of the beneficiaries.
- Assets owned by the household.

Administration of BEAM

BEAM is administered by the Social Dimension Fund in the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare. The Project Management Unit (PMU) of the Enhanced Social Protection Project is responsible for implementation at the national level. The PMU reports to the directorship of the Social Dimension Fund. Implementation is done in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture with which a Memorandum of Agreement has been signed. Other key stakeholders involved in the implementation of BEAM at district level and below are local authorities, office of the District Education Officer, School Authorities and community-based structures that include School Selection Committees, School Development Associations and where appropriate, relevant NGOs and CBOs. Key stakeholders that include the District Education Officer, School Selection Committees and Local Authorities have their Terms of Reference stipulated in the BEAM Operational Manual. An important implementation strategy as elaborated in the Operational Manual is the mobilization of communities to make them aware of and be able to participate in the project, Kajawu and Mwakiwa (2006).

Strengths of BEAM

BEAM seems to be doing well in targeting Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC). The National Poverty Assessment (2003) has mentioned that BEAM assistance reached some 16% of OVCs as compared. In terms of the categories of OVCs targeted, 19% (the highest) reached orphans while 13% (second largest) reached those with chronically ill adults. For the urban and rural dimensions, BEAM has shown a bias towards the later. The Government of Zimbabwe (2005) showed that 10% of orphans had been assisted in urban areas as compared to 20% for the rural areas. UNICEF 2004 showed that on the overall about 7.8% children of school going age (6-17 years) were receiving some form of educational support. Ministry of Public Services, Labour and Social Welfare (2006) showed that some 17% of OVCs were receiving some form of educational assistance, with 11% of OVCs receiving BEAM support. BEAM aims at supporting 25% of the children enrolled in primary and secondary schools. In the year 2005, this figure was actually exceeded as 27% of the children in school were supported.

Shortcomings of BEAM

There are more stringent and bureaucratic measures for children with severe disabilities who require special needs. Thus, in the selection of this category of beneficiaries, the school-based Community Selection Committee only recommends children who should benefit. This would then be followed by a step by step screening through the District Education Officer, Social Welfare Officer and the Schools Psychological Services (which is usually based at the provincial level). "This process is too cumbersome for vulnerable and poor parents. It results in numerous failed applications. Applications for funding are rejected or returned because they are either incomplete or wrongly filled out. The form is difficult to comprehend and complete" (Masdar 2006).

Despite the elaborate and seemingly community-based mechanisms of selecting BEAM beneficiaries, there are still problems associated with the process. Government of Zimbabwe (2005) has alluded to leakages in the BEAM programme with about 5 percent of non-poor households benefiting from the programme at both the primary and secondary school levels (Government of Zimbabwe 2005). Records from the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare reveal that beneficiary selection, as is the case with most social protection measures, is problematic. The community monitoring system that is supposed to provide the checks and balances in the selection process is not yet up and running "It has been observed and complaints received that some children who should not be benefiting from the programme are being selected at the expense of those most needy" (Masdar 2006). Lack of coordination between BEAM and other educational assistance programmes, especially those run by NGOs, has resulted in some children benefiting from both systems, depriving other children in need of support. As a way of getting rid of the problem, efforts should be made to the effect that there should be use of the same selection structures and processes.

The Community Selection Committees are selected on a bi-annual basis and in some cases, this has been noted as presenting challenges. Thus, for instance Masdar (2006) reported that there were cases of favouritism and nepotism by members of an incoming committee who often disqualified beneficiaries of the preceding year. "The short tenure of the selection committee disrupts continuity, as each year the new selection committee selects new

students. In some instances, the selection committee drops students that have been benefiting for more than one school year to allow others to access BEAM”.

Despite the existence of BEAM and other educational initiatives, most of the pupils attending primary and secondary education remain self-financing in terms of paying school fees, implying that their parents pay for their educational costs. Thus in 2003 for instance, about 87% and 84% of primary and secondary schools were self-financing respectively (Government of Zimbabwe (2005). However, a major limitation of BEAM is that it pays only fees related costs, leaving other non-fees costs to parents to settle. Yet Murenha (2006) has demonstrated that the fees related costs of sending a child to school represent only a small proportion of non-fees costs. Thus, the costs of school uniforms and stationery, which constituted the biggest proportion of sending children to school, have to be financed by the parents themselves. The strict government control on fees charged by schools has contributed to a widening gap between the costs of school fees and other non-school fees costs. In practical terms, even the parents of BEAM beneficiaries have to raise significant amounts of money to pay for their non-school fees related expenditure. As an illustration, Murenha (2006) has shown that the per capita grant from which school fees charged were based were Z\$4000 per pupil in a low-density school, Z\$8000 for a pupil in a high-density urban school and Z\$14 500 for a pupil in rural school for primary education. Corresponding figures for secondary education were Z\$12 000 for a pupil in a low-density school, Z\$25 000 for a pupil in high density school and \$50 000 for a pupil in a rural school. Yet, the total cash required for stationery were estimated at Z\$2 067 000 and Z\$4 883 000 in primary and secondary schools respectively. The figures escalate even more if additional costs related to school uniforms are added.

Administrative challenges

A key administrative challenge associated with BEAM is that the disbursement of funds to schools is done through electronic transfers and yet some schools have had their payment delayed following their submission of wrong banking details. For the year 2006 for instance, a total of 277 schools (184 primary and 93 primary schools) failed to access their funds by 30 September following their submission of wrong banking details. In such situations, schools would normally be required to resubmit their banking details, causing further delays in the disbursement of the money

A major problem in the administration of BEAM has been the late disbursement of funds. The study by Murenha (2006) argued that “A large number of schools complained about not getting the money on time, citing occasions where money for first term could be disbursed in the second or third term. In other schools the money for the whole year had not been received... late disbursements of funds to schools compounded the school’s cash flow problems and with the previous run-away inflation, by the time the schools received the money, its purchasing power would have diminished greatly”.

Another major challenge of BEAM was lack of budget provision for Monitoring and Evaluation (M and E) that could have been used to improve the design of the project and gauge its impact. BEAM was initially conceived by the Government of Zimbabwe with the support of international donors, especially the World Bank. The withdrawal of donor support has inevitably compromised the impact of the project, as the Government could not adequately fund the project, including the vital component of M and E.

Another emerging trend which was common was that the children in need of support exceeded by far the maximum number of children that could be supported by BEAM. In almost every year, the children seemed to need support were greater than what BEAM could support and hence many more deserving cases would be dropped.

Recommendations

BEAM is by far, the largest educational assistance programme in the country today. Its importance and significance cannot be under-estimated. BEAM is doing well in its targeting. The sustainability of BEAM is guaranteed and there are many positive issues that can form the basis of learning and sharing experiences of BEAM. BEAM is indeed a Livelihood Based Social Protection Measure. A couple of examples have been identified where BEAM was instrumental in shaping the livelihood base of some of the beneficiaries. Be that as it may, there are key areas where improvement is required in the implementation of BEAM. Some of which are:

- It is desirable to support children through-out their primary and secondary education.
- The scope of interventions also needs to be expanded to include non-fees costs.

- It is also important to put in place mechanisms for conflict management between stakeholders.
- More needs to be done for a periodic analysis and review of BEAM's performance.
- BEAM should go beyond school fees. It should provide school uniforms, books and other stationary and food.

Conclusion

By virtue of being a national programme funded by the Government of Zimbabwe, the programme is wholly owned by Zimbabweans. This is an aspect that is usually missing in programmes of such magnitude and makes BEAM unique even in a regional context. It is known that massive projects implemented using donor and other external funds have often collapsed following the withdrawal of such external support. The sustainability of BEAM has further been enhanced by the creation of local structures that are responsible for implementing the various components at the local level. Given this background, BEAM is a Zimbabwean owned programme whose sustainability from a political, social and even political perspective cannot be questioned. There are however several other factors that seem to threaten the relevance of the programme. As discussed in earlier sections, the high level of inflation in the country prior to the introduction of USD was the biggest threat to the relevance and significance of BEAM. While government, through the policy that controls the fees charged by schools, manages to keep control of the rise in school fees and thereby indirectly making the contributions by BEAM relevant, this has not been very successful. Instead, this resulted in the decline in the quality of services delivered by the education sector.

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