



Taking school improvement to scale in Nigeria

Practice Paper

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Introduction

Identifying and implementing change strategies that create lasting improvement at scale is the holy grail of education reform in populous low/middle income countries such as Nigeria. The grail is made more elusive by the dual challenge of multiple providers of basic education, including different sub-national levels of government and non-State actors, and a rapidly expanding school-age population.

How can providers of basic education be supported to create lasting improvement beyond introducing change interventions? What systems are required? In the context of school effectiveness, what inputs above other inputs lead to the best educational results and, therefore, what investments should providers be prioritising? How can these be sustained at scale? These and related questions continue to engage educators, researchers and development practitioners.

As the Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria (ESSPIN) concludes its 8th and final year we reflect on the efforts of six sub-national (State) governments in Nigeria to improve the schools across their States, with some external technical assistance from ESSPIN. We contribute some insights into large scale and sustainable basic education improvement in the administratively complex setting that is Nigeria. Whilst this paper does not intend to prescribe a template for improving education at scale, it is hoped that these reflections will provide small steps towards unravelling the complex phenomenon called education systems reform.

“Many of the problems we are trying to solve involve supporting the emergence of successful complex systems – social and political institutions, economic change and the formation of various kinds of social capital. These complex processes cannot easily be broken down into a series of steps which will predictably lead to the outcomes we want to see. Instead these solutions evolve: taking small steps, finding out what moves in the right direction, and building on progress”

Owen Barder 2015

Right
ESSPIN's child-centred learning method focuses on improving the attention span of pupils during lessons.



Background and challenges

Nigeria is a low-middle income country with an estimated population of 174 million in 2013 (World Bank, 2015). Like many other countries, it is both geographically and socio-economically diverse. Nigeria operates a federal system of government and is divided into 36 States and 774 local government areas. All three tiers of government (Federal, State and Local) have some responsibility for delivery of education.

In Nigeria two major efforts to reform basic education have been made in the last sixty years. A Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme, implemented from the 1950s to the 1990s, was driven by the singular access objective of getting children into school.

Ultimately, it failed to match significant increases in enrolments with requisite levels of funding, teachers and learning materials. An upgrade programme, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, was launched in 1999 to build on the lessons learned from UPE. It expanded the scope of basic education from six years of primary education to nine years of primary and junior secondary education.

It also enshrined concerns for the relevance and quality of basic education and indicated lifelong learning as a core objective. It is difficult to determine the impact it has had beyond the establishment of an elaborate institutional structure for managing Intervention Funds for basic education. Nigeria's social development challenges remain as daunting as ever:

the high rate of poverty (with 64% of its people living below the \$1.5 per day poverty line) with regional variations ranging from 47% in the South-West to 74% in the North-West and North-East (UN Common Country Analysis (CCA) 2016)

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ESSPIN uses diverse strategies to help pupils identify and retain information, thereby improving learning outcomes of the pupils.



the unwanted record of being home to 10.5 million primary-age children reported to be out-of-school, out of a global total of 57 million (the majority of them located in the conflict stricken northern States), while the 23.1 million who are in school are learning very little (UNESCO GMR 2012)

the plight of 60% of girls between ages 6-17 who are not in school in northern States (DFID 2013)

the distressingly low levels of student achievement where only 8% of Grade 2 pupils in one State managed to attain the required curriculum standard in English language (ESSPIN baseline survey 2010), while in two other States 70% of Grade 3 pupils could not read a single word of a simple narrative text in the local Hausa language (Northern Education Initiative 2013)

fragmented institutional arrangements for managing basic education at different tiers of government leading to lack of accountability and duplication of efforts (Humphreys and Crawford 2014)

the reality of corruption, poor track record of budget execution, and weak financial monitoring and reporting (Santcross et al. 2009)

Underneath the macro indicators and the high level pictures of gloom, the problem is even starker. Henneveld and Craig could not have been more vivid in describing a typical semi-urban or rural African school:

Below
ESSPIN has trained teachers to be able to deliver competent lessons.

“The school consists of six to ten classrooms in two or three blocks. The blocks will vary in quality; all will suffer from inadequate maintenance; most will be surrounded by a dusty compound. Up to eighty small children will squeeze into poorly-lit rooms designed for no more than forty, and many children may not have chairs or desks. The teachers must attempt to provide instruction with only a chalkboard as an aid. Children may have notebooks, and a few, depending on the... local economic conditions may have textbooks. The teaching process is dominated by the teacher whose delivery is usually desultory and boring. The teachers’ salaries, training and work conditions dampen the enthusiasm of even the most dedicated among them. The overall effect in most schools is that a ritual is being played out in which the participants understand and appreciate little of what is happening. It is small wonder that student achievement is poor.”

Henneveld and Craig 1996



Our approach

This was the exact situation of many public primary schools in Nigeria when ESSPIN began in 2008. The need for change was clear. The opportunity to introduce change innovations was relatively straightforward, however implementing change innovations that create lasting improvement at scale was a complex task. With funding from UK Aid, ESSPIN was designed as a technical assistance programme to this end. Specifically, ESSPIN was required to contribute to improvement of learning outcomes for children of primary school age in six Nigerian States – Enugu, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Kwara and Lagos.

It worked from 2008 to 2014 on a budget of £92m (c. \$140m) to develop the capability of schools, communities, State institutions and selected national agencies to support school quality improvement. Based on increased evidence of State-led reform, ESSPIN was further extended until January 2017 on an additional budget of £33m (c. \$50m). The extension was to “allow the project [ESSPIN] to continue to assist the six States technically, and through direct project support, to consolidate, deepen and embed their own school improvement reforms and strategies” (DFID 2014).

This section highlights ESSPIN’s approach to implementing change innovations at scale that create lasting improvement and lessons learned. We identify six key learning themes:

Understanding the scale of the problem

Building inclusive partnerships

The technical approach

Evidence of impact

Using data as an advocacy tool to release resources

Ongoing capacity development



Right

Teachers trained by ESSPIN use teaching aids to summarise their lessons thereby helping pupils share and retain knowledge.

Understanding the scale of the problem

The first mission was to create awareness and understanding of the need for change amongst partner institutions and stakeholders. Anecdotal accounts of the scale of the educational crisis were abundant but insufficient as a basis for strategic planning and policy implementation.

ESSPIN conducted five baseline studies – a teacher development needs assessment, a headteacher survey, a classroom observation study, a monitoring of learning achievement (MLA) study, and a community perception survey. In addition, a number of field studies were conducted to review teacher training and in-service provisions and support services to schools.

The Teacher Development Needs Assessment revealed that only a small number of teachers across the six States had adequate knowledge and competency levels to teach the primary school curriculum. Over 90% of teachers scored under 30% on tests based on Grade 4 Mathematics and English Language curricula, effectively what a 10-year old should achieve. As a result, teachers were unable to lead school based professional development activities to raise standards (ESSPIN TDNA 2010).

Below
ESSPIN works to create a conducive learning environment for pupils. An all-inclusive participatory style of learning that allows pupils to get involved in class activities.

The Headteacher Survey analysed how much time a headteacher spent each day on school leadership tasks to ensure that students were being properly taught. It found that nearly two-thirds of a headteacher's time was spent on activities unconnected to leading or managing a school. There was little evidence of development planning taking place, and, therefore, little basis for meaningful school improvement (ESSPIN baseline report 2010).

The Classroom Observation Study examined the behaviour of teachers and pupils in the classroom. A total of 23 behaviours for teachers and 21 for students were observed. The results showed that learners were mostly passive and that teaching was almost totally didactic. Teachers taught the curriculum and not the children (ESSPIN baseline report 2010).



The MLA Survey assessed the learning outcomes of primary Grade 2 and 4 students in English Language and Mathematics using instruments based on the Nigerian Grade 1-4 curriculum. The findings showed that pupils in both grades were not performing at the curriculum level expected in both literacy in English and numeracy. Students largely lacked the foundations of learning needed to cope with the school curriculum (ESSPIN MLA Survey 2010).

The Community Survey assessed the quality of support to schools by communities, the role of civil society organisations, perceptions of the quality of education service delivery, and communication channels between communities and schools. The findings showed that school based management committees, where they existed, met infrequently - in one State, only 1% of parents had attended one meeting during an entire school year. Concerns were voiced over the dormant role of local government education committees. CSOs were considered as having a positive influence on school/ community relations (ESSPIN Community Survey 2010).

These and other baseline research findings equipped ESSPIN with hard data for engaging and challenging State governments to embrace change.

Building inclusive partnerships

Dissemination of the baseline research findings included high level discussions with principal State government officials aimed at encouraging them to sign up for a change agenda. Acceptance of the findings and, therefore, acknowledgement of the scale of the issues by the political hierarchy was an important first step. Each State was helped to review its existing policies and strategic plans and whether those were fit for purpose for addressing the required reform.



Left
Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) of pupils has helped various governments better understand and plan for education in their states.

The level of available resources that each State was ready to commit to remedial interventions determined the scale of initial school improvement pilots proposed by ESSPIN. ESSPIN would support implementation of the pilots through a combination of technical assistance and seed funding of pilot activities. Five States opted for small scale pilots comprising schools selected on the basis of criteria such as disadvantage, geographical coverage, existing administrative clusters, and, in one case, political bias (in Enugu, the selected pilot local government area was the home of the State Governor). In one State, Kwara, the government was shocked into action by the stark findings of the Teacher Development Needs Assessment and decided to commit its resources to piloting at scale.

It launched a State-wide education reform campaign labelled “Every Child Counts” and included all primary schools in the ESSPIN school improvement pilot. In the interest of scale and sustainability it was critical that this was led by State governments.

The political discussions included identification of specific State institutions to own and drive implementation of the reform programme. In all States, the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), with a direct mandate to manage basic education, was the institutional partner of choice. Ministries of Education were also engaged on the basis of their oversight role and responsibility for governance functions such as data management, strategic planning and budgeting, policy regulations and quality assurance services.

Community level conversations were also held with key gatekeepers such as traditional and religious leaders, parent groups and community-based organisations. Community entry was smooth as a result and non-government actors were able to secure their critical place in the change agenda being put together.

Every State government is under pressure to show quick visible results. ESSPIN committed to delivering some quick wins to buy time for the school improvement pilot, a complex process that would only produce slow incremental results over time. A school infrastructure project was introduced as a result which involved construction of water facilities, segregated toilets, meeting the needs of girls, and renovation of classrooms.

Right
Now, teachers use various teaching aids to impact knowledge to their pupils.



At this stage, key partnerships had been formed with a joint commitment for change. Interventions were to be designed around robust evidence of educational gaps as well as individual State's needs and available resources. Achieving this from the outset was a critical step to building lasting educational improvement at scale.

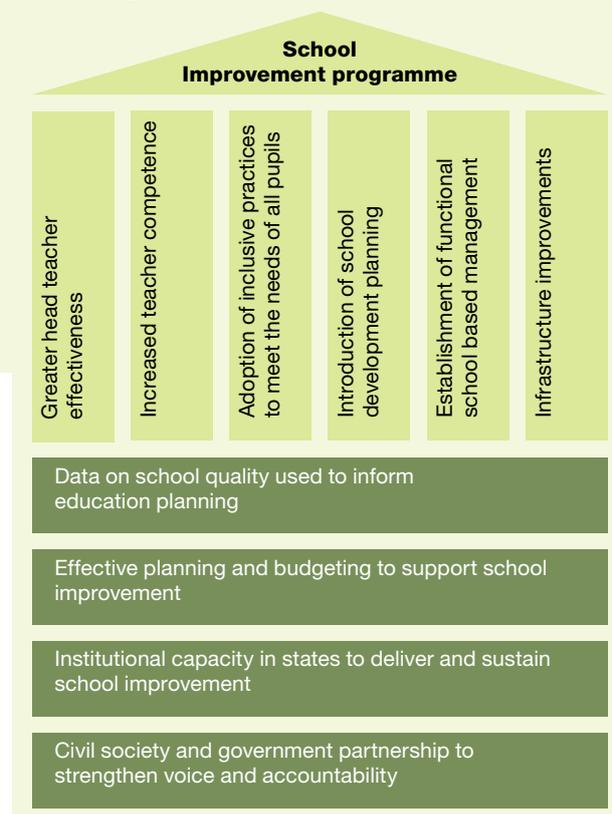
The technical approach

School improvement is complex. There is no magic bullet. Whilst significant research has been conducted on school improvement, at best this serves as insights and signposts which must be sensitive to the local context. This understanding was brought to bear on the conception of ESSPIN's approach. ESSPIN's theory of change sets out a conceptual framework for its school improvement programme (SIP). This can be seen in Diagram 1.

ESSPIN's conceptual framework consists of five pillars (effective headteachers, competent teachers, inclusive practices, school development planning and functional school based management committees), which are in-turn underpinned by four cross-cutting areas of capacity development. ESSPIN's theory of change asserts that sustainable school improvement is possible at scale if implemented through a whole systems approach where inter-connected factors complement each other and the programme works strategically through all three levels of Government.

A key role of ESSPIN is to support basic education providers to implement the SIP components and create lasting improvement at scale. With this in mind all pilots were designed from the outset to be scaled, to be owned by government and to be cost-effective. A pragmatic approach to implementation was adopted which recognised budget and capacity constraints and allowed phased implementation of SIP components. A nimble environment was created whereby education stakeholders were able to learn, adapt and build upon and steer progress specific to their context.

Diagram 1: ESSPIN's Conceptual Framework for School Improvement



Evidence of Impact

Any improvement programme relies upon robust evidence to shine light on what is working well and where the gaps are. Evidence gathering, dissemination and learning were central to ESSPIN's approach. Data served as an advocacy tool, it was shared with government to highlight gaps in the education system in order to drive commitment to change and data was used to highlight where successes were being made in order to encourage commitment to sustain and scale school improvement interventions.

ESSPIN commissioned a comprehensive impact study called the Composite Survey, in total three Composite Surveys were conducted over the eight years. The first was conducted in 2012, with report of findings published in 2013. The Survey aimed at assessing the effects of ESSPIN's school improvement programme through reporting on indicators of teacher competence, head teacher effectiveness, SBMC functionality, school development and inclusive practices (ESSPIN's school improvement Outputs); overall school quality (ESSPIN's school improvement Outcome); and student learning achievement (ESSPIN's school improvement Impact).

The Composite Survey complemented other sources of evidence of impact, e.g. a qualitative study of SBMC impact, annual State government reports of school progress, and trend analyses of Annual School Census data and provided, for the first time, empirical endorsement of the ESSPIN school improvement model. A second survey was completed in 2014 and the final one in 2016.

In October 2016, Composite Survey 3 found that:

Head teachers in schools that have had more ESSPIN intervention are much more effective than those in schools with little ESSPIN intervention.

School development planning has improved dramatically since 2014. Schools which have had more ESSPIN intervention do school development planning much better than those with less intervention.



Left
Through ESSPIN training, teachers have devised effective ways of engaging boys and girls on equal basis, helping to meet up with educational standards.

Trends in inclusiveness – measured by aspects such as whether the head teacher has taken action on learners’ attendance, and whether teachers engage boys and girls equally – depend on the exact measure used. Schools with more ESSPIN intervention are not more likely than those with less intervention to meet the overall standard, although they are more likely to have partly met it.

School-based management committees (SBMCs) have become much more functional since 2012 or 2014, and are also more inclusive of women and children. ESSPIN intervention is associated with much better-functioning and inclusive SBMCs.

Teachers have become more competent since 2014, although not compared with 2012. Teachers trained through ESSPIN have better test scores and are more likely to use teaching aids, summarise their lessons, and test learners’ knowledge.

Overall school quality has improved since 2012, according to our composite measure based on head teacher effectiveness, school development planning, SBMC functionality, and teacher competence. Each year of ESSPIN intervention is associated with an increase of around 10 percentage points in the proportion of schools that meet the quality standard.

Composite Survey 3 also compared change over time across ESSPIN’s key indicators demonstrating marked improvements, particularly in terms of school development planning, SBMC functionality and inclusiveness, and overall school quality. Moreover, schools which had more ESSPIN intervention have more effective head teachers in 2016, are better at school development planning, are more inclusive, and are much more likely to have well-functioning SBMCs in which women and children participate. These results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Change over time: key indicators in 2012, 2014, 2016

	2012 (CS1)	2014 (CS2)	2016 (CS3)	Change 2012-16	Change 2014-16
Effective head teacher (%)	13.6	14.2	17.8	+4.1	+3.6
School development planning (%)	3.8	7.4	18.6	+14.8*	+11.3*
Inclusive (%)	18.8	10.5	11.4	-7.4*	+0.9
Functioning SBMC (%)	21.7	30.9	44.1	+22.4*	+13.2*
Competent teachers (%)	69.7	57.4	66.8	-2.9	+9.4*
Competent teachers (new measure, %)		21.0	20.5	n/a	-0.5
Good quality school (%)	3.9	8.3	17.9	+14.0*	+9.6*
Good quality school (new measure, %)		4.6	5.4	n/a	+0.9

A key assumption in ESSPINs approach is that, by demonstrating results of an effective school improvement model, this will secure state government buy-in and convince States to utilise their own considerable resources to expand the positive impact of the model to all children.

Using data as an advocacy tool to release resources

ESSPIN's theory of change is based on the premise that evidence of impact from the pilot schools, proving that the school improvement programme approach works, will convince State governments to invest their own resources in scale up. A concerted programme of political engagement was, therefore, embarked upon to persuade State governments to focus more of their resources on expanding the benefits of the SIP to as many more schools as was affordable.

States were supported with costed workplans for exploring different expansion scenarios. A quarterly meeting of Education Commissioners from the six States was introduced to create debate, share experiences, review SIP progress and, ultimately, take responsibility for resourcing the required expansion. New SIP focus schools funded by State governments after the ESSPIN pilots came to be known as Phase 2 schools (Phase 1 being the pilots).

A State's annual budget for education was the most obvious source of SIP funding. However, budget releases were politically charged activities, with competing interests for limited resources, and only three of the six States (Kano, Jigawa and Lagos) managed to fund aspects of SIP expansion from their annual State budgets. The rest relied on federal funding.

Federal funding took the form of a non-matching grant element of the federal Intervention Funds set aside to support Teacher Professional Development (TPD) in States by UBEC¹. ESSPIN engaged UBEC to clarify guidelines for accessing the funds. Significantly, UBEC endorsed the integrated school improvement programme and accepted to be flexible in allowing ESSPIN partner States to utilise their TPD allocations, in full or in proportions, on SIP scale up. The TPD funds became the most predictable source of resources for SIP scale up.

Right

Overall, teachers' level of competence and effectiveness has increased; gathering data to highlight where successes were being made in order to encourage commitment, and to secure government buy-in to expand the positive impact of ESSPIN.



¹ The Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) was set up the 2004 UBE Act to manage disbursement of special Intervention Funds for basic education sourced from an annual retention of 2% of the Consolidated Federal Revenue. UBEC monitors utilisation of Intervention Funds through SUBEBs at State level.

ESSPIN also actively supported the efforts of some State governments to explore other sources of funding. Notably, three northern States (Kano, Kaduna and Jigawa) were supported to prepare successful applications for Global Partnership on Education (GPE) funding, a facility that will boost SIP consolidation work in each State with \$20m over three years.

A key success is that UBEC itself formally adopted the ESSPIN SBMC development model in 2013 and has since rolled it out nationally – to all 36 Nigerian States and the federal capital territory – using its own resources.

Thus, through demonstrating impact and using impact data as an advocacy tool, ESSPIN successfully leveraged the release of government resources to scale up school improvement.

Ongoing capacity development

The most important factor in creating change that leads to lasting improvements is people. Adequate funding is only an enabler; the quality, pace and longevity of improvement is down to people within the system. ESSPIN has, therefore, prioritised ongoing capacity development to ensure that the considerable resources provided by States are optimally utilised.

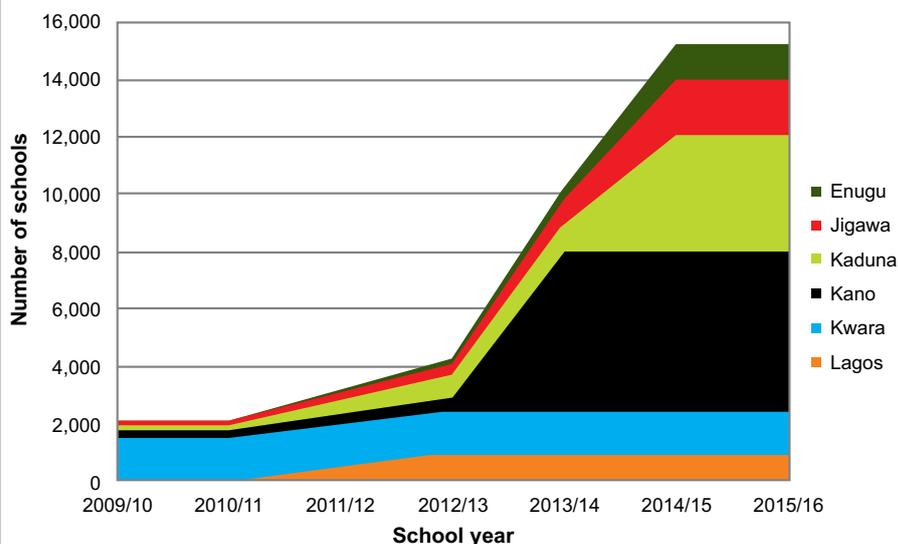
Table 2: Government resources leveraged for scale up of the ESSPIN school improvement programme, July 2012 to September 2016

	Cumulative total 2012-2016	
Enugu	NGN 972,395,106	£3,241,317
Jigawa	NGN 644,616,619	£2,148,722
Kaduna	NGN 1,119,503,031	£3,731,677
Kano	NGN 588,000,000	£1,960,000
Kwara	NGN 364,506,760	£1,215,023
Lagos	NGN 945,200,400	£3,150,668
Total	NGN 4,634,221,916	£15,447,406
Federal	NGN 1,721,200,000	£5,737,333
Grand Total	NGN 6,355,421,916	£21,184,740

Chart 1: Scale of SIP expansion by State by year (public primary schools), September 2016

ESSPIN has reached over 15,000 schools

Number of schools reached by the school improvement programme (SIP)



The numbers shown are schools that have received at least one year of full intervention between 2009 and 2015. The total number of public primary school reached by SIP as of September 2016 is 16,407.

ESSPIN's capacity building programme works simultaneously at all intervention levels – State, local government and school. By September 2016, 43,962 State/LGEA officials were trained to support school improvement, including:

State School Improvement Teams (SSITs): master trainers trained directly by ESSPIN to plan and manage SIP delivery, were leading planning and implementation of training programmes for head teachers and teachers, and providing academic leadership.

School Support Officers (SSOs): local government based personnel with day-to-day responsibility for school supervision, were visiting schools regularly and supporting head teachers and teachers under the direction of SSITs.

Social Mobilisation Officers (SMOs): local government based personnel with day-to-day responsibility for liaising with communities, were working in partnership with CSOs to mobilise, train and mentor School Based Management Committees (SBMCs).

20,171 head teachers and assistant head teachers were receiving training and support to demonstrate better school leadership, support teachers better, and collaborate more effectively with SBMCs.

104,000 teachers were receiving training and support to improve personal effectiveness and become more competent teachers.

2,112 CSO members had had their capacity to support SBMCs and undertake issues based advocacy strengthened.

Right
Pupils can now participate in the teaching and learning process in schools.



Some conclusions

The SSITs, described as “the shock troops of change”, have been central to SIP delivery. They were appointed based on competitive selection, granted two-year secondments by their State governments (so their salaries continue to be paid), and personify the idea of State-led reform. They have contributed to large-scale change by helping:

States to think through and plan how to achieve the vision for schools

LGEAs to reorient their priorities and practices for better support to schools

Head teachers to understand their responsibility for raising school standards and fulfil this through more effective leadership

Teachers to understand their responsibility for teaching children and to be proactive in improving their teaching (Kay and Breakell 2011)

It is essential that this training and support framework for key personnel remains in place for the delivery of SIP at scale to be sustainable. To this end, ESSPIN has developed and shared a bank of materials such as guidebooks and master trainer manuals to provide a framework for both ESSPIN and non-ESSPIN States that can be used with little or no external support. Dissemination events are taking place across all six states ensuring States have the resources they need to continue school improvement.

As ESSPIN activities draw to a close the real success of the programme depends upon the continued scaling of school improvement in Nigeria. Investments have been made in people, technical assistance, evidence gathering, advocacy, partnership, toolkits, and much more. The next phase of the scale up is even more challenging, it is about consolidation by the States themselves. ESSPIN has sought to adequately prepare States to plan for and implement school improvement on an ongoing basis, effectively the year-on-year duty of every responsible State government. As we reflect on the journey made to date and the impact ESSPIN has had on over 6 million children in Nigeria we recognise that our lessons learned provide useful insights on the phenomenon of scaling school improvement.



Left
Teachers have been trained and supported by ESSPIN to improve personal effectiveness and become more competent in delivering their lessons.

The objective of school improvement has to be visible and resonant at all times, particularly to State political hierarchies who control resources but do not necessarily possess depth of understanding of educational change. Dissemination of key data, messages and evidence of what works was effective to convince stakeholders of the need for change and to put scale up at the front of the agenda.

In order for the government to take up the intervention and scale it, sustainable government funding needs to be secured. Recognising budget and capacity constraints and operating within these is essential for sustainable scale up. Holding accurate data on unit costs of the school improvement programme and supporting government agencies to plan and cost scale up enabled ESSPIN and government to scale up the school improvement pilots, in some instances state wide.

Sustainability and quality of school improvement relies upon the people within the system. Building inclusive partnership as well as building capacity of institutions and individuals enables scale up to continue after the programme ends.

ESSPIN trained and enabled stakeholders at all levels, including all three levels of government, school members (including women and children) and the community to make and implement decisions on school improvement and be accountable for results.

Working at scale requires balancing technical assistance with political engagement. Technical solutions are necessary but not sufficient in themselves to achieve large-scale change. Development assistance programmes proposing work at scale will inevitably need to address this question and understand that we cannot enact reforms ourselves but we can influence, catalyse, and support them.

Below
ESSPIN has through diverse trainings impacted 6.5m children in a period of eight and half years.



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