Inspections and improvements in Ugandan secondary schools – an analysis of policies and practices [1]

Introduction

This report by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) presents findings and recommendations from a political economy analysis (PEA) of secondary school inspections and improvements in Uganda. Our research examines the interplay between formal and informal contextual factors and stakeholders relevant to the topic. We adapted the PEA approach to study education-system issues by covering three interrelated educational contexts: policy implementation and practice, agenda-setting and policy formulation.

The study also investigated the Inspect and Improve (I&I) programme, which has been co-designed and implemented by the organisation Promoting Equality in African Schools (PEAS) and the Directorate of Education Standards (DES) of Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) to advance school leadership and learning outcomes in Ugandan secondary schools.

> **The Inspect and Improve programme**
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> PEAS, an education non-governmental organisation, and DES have joined forces through the I&I programme since 2019, by combining PEAS' approach to school leadership development and the MOES' reformed secondary school inspection framework.
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> I&I operates as a pilot in an increasing number of Ugandan schools and aims to expand its contributions to the country's education sector by supporting schools and large-scale system-level improvements in education quality.
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> NFER has previously served as a Learning Partner and independent evaluator to PEAS on the I&I programme.

The study provides strategic evidence and insights that can help to further improve secondary school inspections and improvements in Uganda.

Methodology

We structured this research as an exploratory case study, with a flexible, adaptive research design suitable for under-researched areas. This allowed us to refine our understanding of the local context and the research topic throughout the process. The study took place between 2021 and 2023 and had four phases:

- Phase 1 (inception): Consultation sessions and desk review of academic and grey literatures, policy texts and local press articles
- Phase 2: Semi-structured qualitative interviews
- Phase 3: Thematic data analysis

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[1] This brief summarises the 2023 report *Inspections and improvements in Ugandan secondary schools – an analysis of policies and practices* authored by Gustavo Henndel Lopes, Katarzyna Kubacka, Jessica Chu and Geeta Gambhir and published by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

- Phase 4: Reporting

In interpreting the results and recommendations, readers should consider that our research is limited by the sample of interviewees, the extent of the familiarity interviewees had with the I&I programme and their understanding of the secondary school inspection system in Uganda, and the fact that I&I is constantly evolving and therefore our research offers a snapshot analysis of its progress.

Findings

As far as possible, our research looked at the connection between 'improvements' and 'inspections' rather than treating them separately and included aspects from different educational contexts and levels across the secondary education system.

1- I&I in the context of school inspections and improvements

- PEAS and I&I have set a benchmark for secondary education quality and accountability in Uganda
- I&I is a package of support mechanisms structured around the inspection process but focused on assisting schools in realising school improvements
- I&I works with individual schools but aims to scale up its approach and reach a system-level impact

2- School inspections as a gateway to school improvements

- There has been a growing focus on school inspections as a tool to support education quality in Uganda
- At the school level, inspections are prone to issues that affect schools' ability to improve[2]
- Schools are in charge of improvements once an inspection report is released, but their capacities to implement improvements are variable and can be limited
- Private and government schools face different constraints in financing improvement initiatives
- The inspection system faces capacity bottlenecks that affect school improvements at large
- The availability and sharing of school inspection data is seen as a pending driver of school improvements

3- Linking secondary school inspections to school improvements at the system level

- Even though DES leads on inspections, its operations are co-defined with other government stakeholders
- School improvements often involve addressing policy needs and coordinating stakeholders situated across the school system
- Stakeholders looking to work at the education-system level need to engage with a formal hierarchy of settings in the MOES to progress proposals and requests

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[2] Such as limited opportunities for headteachers to prepare for and participate in inspections, among others.

Conclusion

The results confirm that, as per government guidelines, school inspections are a core school improvement mechanism in Uganda, with outcomes highly dependent on local contexts. At the same time, we find that the ability of the whole secondary school sector to facilitate school improvements is the determining factor for inspections to drive secondary school quality at scale. Furthermore, there is not yet enough recognition of the complexity of the link between school improvements and school inspections and how that link plays out in the different types of Ugandan secondary schools, for example, those that operate under the tuition fee-free Universal Secondary Education (USE) policy or low-fee private ones, which face different needs, facilitators and barriers.

Our study points to the need to acknowledge and factor in whole-system approaches to school improvement to ensure Uganda's school inspection and improvement policies are implemented at their full potential. The findings suggest that to achieve widespread school improvements, there must be extensive coordination – in and around schools – between different stakeholders during the inspection and improvement cycles. These stakeholders include school leaders, school staff, school communities, district officials, school inspectors, MOES divisions and policymakers.

As a pilot, the I&I programme has succeeded in developing a thriving school improvement culture. However, coordinating stakeholders who participate in school inspections and improvements in secondary schools and at other education sector levels will certainly become increasingly complex as the programme scales up. I&I would therefore benefit from a strategic revision that enables it to make the most of its school-level expertise while adapting to working with and through the Ugandan education sector's governance system.

Recommendations for I&I

Resources and the broader socio-political context will determine I&I's ability to scale up, influence education policy and practice, and affect widespread system-level changes. As I&I considers lessons learned for the next stage of the programme, resource allocation and prioritisation will hence be key to ensuring future approaches are feasible and relevant to PEAS, DES, the wider MOES, and the schools. This is an ambitious task, and for this reason we have focused our recommendations on a few key actions that we consider to be most relevant and achievable in the next stages of programme development:

- Whilst recognising the wide range of stakeholders who have a role in successful school improvement, I&I should continue to focus on providing a role model for secondary school inspection and improvement practices
- I&I should engage ambitiously with various education stakeholders by leveraging its track record
- I&I should continue and increase its efforts to raise the programme's profile by working strategically on the programme's reputation and acceptance
- I&I needs a strategic agenda for research, evaluation and learning to prepare for and execute its next strategy.