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Examining Nigeria's learning crisis: Can communities be mobilized to take action?

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Abstract

Until recently, policy design and interventions in basic education were unduly focused on increasing school enrollment in developing countries, with little attention on improving the quality of learning. Using two states in Nigeria – Lagos and Kano, this paper examined the extent to which School Based Management Committees (SBMCs) mobilized actions (collective and private) to improve school-level accountability, and how this affected school performance and learning outcomes. The study finds that increasing citizen-clients' participation and voice via SBMCs can improve educational outcomes by strengthening accountability. When functional, their activities remarkably raise intermediate outcomes (i.e., school resources and enrolment), however, there is no evidence to suggest that they improve children's learning outcomes. SBMCs vary widely in functionality, with variations largely reflecting differences in contextual factors such as local politics and the extent of poverty. Successful and unsuccessful SBMCs seem to differ mostly on strength of leadership. These findings highlight the need for complementary demand-side informational campaigns that explicitly aim to raise parent's expectations and aspirations for their children. Future research should focus on how effective Committees influence local politics, but also how local communities affect the effectiveness of School Committees.

Introduction

Until recently, policy design and interventions in basic education were unduly focused on increasing school enrollment in developing countries, with little attention on improving the quality of learning. Thus, despite appreciable progress in reducing the huge number of Out-of-School Children (OOSCs), an increasing evidence-base shows that children are not learning (Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2015; R4D 2015).

The 2014 Education for All Global Monitoring Report shows that of the world's 650 million children of primary school age, '250 million…are unable to read, write, or do basic mathematics' (UNESCO 2014, p.19). Of this number, the report notes that 120 million are enrolled in primary schools. While this learning crisis is a global one, it is more prevalent in Low and Middle Income Countries. Since 2009, Citizen-led Household Assessment of children's literacy and numeracy skills conducted in India, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and more recently Nigeria, show that even when in school, children are barely learning basic skills (Pratham 2005; Uwezo 2016; Tep Centre 2016).

This piece examines the extent to which School-Based Management (SBM) mobilizes action (collective and private) to improve accountability, and how this affects educational outcomes. Outcomes are analyzed at the school, teacher, and student-level, respectively. Key dimensions along which successful and unsuccessful SBMs may differ, are also investigated. The study focuses on the School-Based Management Committees (SMBCs) variant of SBMs; and the short-route of accountability. The research questions are analyzed qualitatively following the accountability framework of World Bank (2004). In consistence with Hirschman (1970), it postulates that boosting citizen-clients' voice by encouraging their involvement in public service provision strengthens the accountability chain, thereby, improving the quality of service delivery.

The study finds that SBMCs in Nigeria motivate actions that improve educational outcomes, albeit with significant variations. When functional, their activities remarkably raise intermediate outcomes (i.e., school resources and enrolment), however, there is no evidence to suggest that they improve children's learning outcomes. These findings contribute to the SBM literature by shedding light on how capacity building and informational interventions in low-resource settings can improve citizens' ability to take collecting action.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 discusses why studying the above research questions in Nigeria is important, and why SBMs matter. Section 2 reviews related literature, while the context and analytical framework is presented in Section 3. Section 4 analyzes and discusses key findings. Section 5 concludes and provides direction for future research on SBMs.

Rationale for using Nigeria as a case study

With a rapidly growing population, Nigeria faces the task of enrolling 8.7 million OOSCs - the highest in the world, in primary schools (Nwoko 2015). Yet, it urgently needs to improve the quality of education. In 2015, for instance, the quality of education ranked 124th out of 144 countries on the Global Competitiveness Index. Similarly, a 2015 World Bank study on learning achievement in 23 African countries ranked Nigeria's primary school mean score (30 per cent) as the lowest (Tep Centre 2016).

Much of the policies in Nigeria's basic education sector focuses on supply-side constraints rather than demand-side issues. The high number of OOSCs and the poor quality of education, therefore, justifies the need to look at how parental investments and community engagement can be strengthened to improve enrolment and learning outcomes. Notwithstanding the role of SBMCs in achieving this, 60 per cent of them are not functional (FME 2012).

This provides a rich context to examine how voice and accountability via SBMs. Two reasons motivated the choice of using Lagos and Kano for the study. First, it ensures a balanced geographical representation of basic education in Nigeria, with Lagos in the South and Kano in the North. Second, they are Nigeria's largest and second largest cities respectively, and thus densely populated.

Why does School-Based Management matter?

Developing countries are plagued by the poor quality of public services (World Bank 2004). Banerjee et al (2008) argue that public service providers face weaker incentives when delivering quality services, but face sharper incentives when providing quantifiable and verifiable public services such as educational inputs. More so, distributive politics and pervasive corruption makes it difficult for citizens to hold their representatives and policymakers accountable for their performance. With frequent failures in the long route of accountability, Berrera-Osorio et al (2009) and World Bank (2004) argue that the quality of public service delivery can be improved by strengthening the short route of accountability. That is, by increasing the power of citizen-clients' to directly hold frontline service providers accountable.

Evidence from scholars and International development agencies suggest that increasing citizen-clients' involvement increases demand-responsiveness and strengthens local accountability for the provision of public services (Björkman Nyqvist and Svensson 2014; Reinikka and Svensson 2006, World Bank, 2004). In view of this, many developing country

governments have devolved decision-making to schools through SBMs in efforts to improve the quality of basic education (Carr-Hill et al. 2016; Berrera-Osorio et al. 2009). In SBMs, the authority and responsibility to make decisions about school operations are transferred to local stakeholders. This may include a combination of principals, teachers, parents, students, and communities (Bruns, Filmer, and Patrinos 2011). Although this process varies widely across countries, it alters decisions on financing, teacher training, and school governance (Geo-Jaja 2004).

The logic behind school-decentralization is straightforward. The participation of beneficiaries – parents and communities, is expected to increase their voice and power, thereby, enhancing their ability to hold frontline service providers *directly* accountable. Theoretically, the presumption is that more informed principals, in principal-agent relationships, can exert considerable pressure through *actions* that will in turn improve the quality of service delivery (Bruns, Filmer, and Patrinos 2011; Lieberman, Posner, and Tsai 2014).

Many authors argue that increased school autonomy and strengthened accountability chains via SBMs can enhance school outcomes. (Bruns, Filmer, and Patrinos 2011; Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2015; Yamada 2013). Other authors, however, find contrary evidence. In a study of school decentralizing in Africa and the options for Nigeria, Geo-Jaja (2004) argues that SBMs serve as cost-sharing mechanisms to reduce government's financial burden of providing free education. Authors such as Björkman and Svensson (2010) use empirical evidence to show that contextual factors such as ethnic fractionalization can considerable hinder the ability of citizen-clients' to hold service providers accountable.

Related literature on information, beneficiary participation, and service delivery

According to Khemani (2005), the provision of public services is not limited by the level of resources, but rather the strength of accountability at the local-level. In a study of local health service delivery in Nigeria, she provides evidence to show that poor local accountability reflects in the non-provision of critical inputs such as health worker's salaries. Khemani argues that interventions to provide citizens with greater information about resources and the responsibilities of local representatives, can bridge these accountability gaps.

The entire World Development Report (WDR) on 'Making Services work for the Poor' (World Bank 2004) was devoted on the above issue – how informational and participatory interventions can increase citizen activism, and thus, lead to improved service delivery. Poor citizens, the report notes, are more likely to hold service providers accountable if they

are empowered with information and are part of decision-making. Since then, policy interventions embedded with these ideals have been implemented in social sectors across the developing world. Of course, this effort has largely been financed by international development partners[1].

Many authors have sought to examine the hypothesized causal link claimed by World Bank (2004). The influential work of Björkman and Svensson (2009) set the pace by providing evidence that information improves the quality of service delivery. In a randomized field experiment on local accountability and public primary healthcare in Uganda, the authors find that encouraging community participation and providing beneficiaries with information on staff performance via report cards improved the quality of healthcare services. In a follow-up study, Björkman, Walque, and Svensson (2014) find that improvements in the health outcome of beneficiaries persisted in both the long and short-run. Despite the robustness of these results, local contextual factors played a key role. For instance, when Björkman and Svensson (2010) combined their earlier dataset with sub-national data on income, ethic, and linguistics, they find that the extent of ethnic fractionalization explained why some communities successfully mobilized to improve healthcare delivery, while others could not.

Another study in Uganda by Reinikka and Svensson (2006) find that beneficiaries (parents and teachers) exposure to information on public-primary school grants via a newspaper campaign reduced the ability of local officials to capture the school-grants. In addition, the information campaign had significant positive impact on both student enrollment and test scores (Reinikka and Svensson 2005). Olken (2007) provides a contrary evidence in a study that examined the role of grass-root/community monitoring in reducing corruption in 600 rural road projects in Indonesia. His findings show that increasing participation of beneficiaries had insignificant impact on corruption, especially in situations where free-rider issues and local elite capture were entrenched.

In the education sector, Banerjee et al. (2008) examined an intervention designed to encourage the involvement of parents and communities in public primary schools via SBMCs in India. Despite providing information coupled with training in a new test tool, as well as organizing volunteers to teach illiterate children, the authors surprisingly found no positive effect on levels of participation, teacher effort, and student learning outcomes. The study concluded that although beneficiaries intrinsically valued education, they face constraints which hindered their participation to improve public schools. Similarly, Lieberman, Posner, and Tsai (2014) show that Uwezo, a large-scale information intervention in Kenya which aims to increase citizen activism by providing information to parents about

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[1] Berrera-Osorio et al (2009) note World Bank financial support to SBMs was USD 1.7 billion, representing 23 per cent of lending for basic education between 2000-2006.

their children's numeracy and literature skills, has no impact on learning outcomes, private action, and collective action.

Thus, while proving information to beneficiaries can improve service delivery by strengthening citizen-clients' voice and participation, there are many instances when it is ineffective. This is more likely in developing countries where citizens cannot effectively use their voice, given repression from government, or their agents. This view is corroborated by Hirschman (1986), who notes that repression can led to '[citizen] passivity, acquiescence, inaction, withdrawal, and resignation...' (p.81). In these occasions, the cost of private action is higher than anticipated benefits, thus, disincentivizing citizen-clients' from taking actions that will generate collective benefit.

Context and Analytical Framework for SBMCs in Nigeria

Context

SBMCs were established across basic education schools (primary and junior secondary) in Nigeria following their approval by the National Council on Education (NCE) in 2006. They comprise of community stakeholders, and have objectives synonymous with standard SBMs. Aside participating in school governance, they are also expected to mobilize resources for school development, assure the quality of education delivery, promote accountability, as well as provide an enabling environment for *all* children to learn (Gershberg et al. 2015).

However, with no statutory provision for financial resources and capacity development, this rather ambitious objective meant that most SBMCs were not functional (FME 2012). Likewise, an earlier study by Hughes (2009) shows that they were not effective, or participatory as intended, and thus, needed significant training and resources to achieve improved educational outcomes. Even so, SBMCs in Nigeria lack the authority to fire underperforming teachers, or hire teachers on a parmanent basis. School decentrialzation was therefore unaccompanied with a true devolution of powers; as school teachers are still accountable to higher-level bureaucrats. Given this, can SBMCs play an effective *oversight role* despite having no power to sanction or reward teachers or head teachers, as is currently the case?

Against this background, the Education Sector Programme in Nigeria (ESSPIN)[2] in partnership with the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), and Civil Society

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[2] ESSPIN is an 8 ½ year programme in Nigeria (2008–2017). It supports Enugu, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Kwara and Lagos, and aims to develop effective planning, financing and service delivery systems that will improve the quality of schools, teaching and learning.
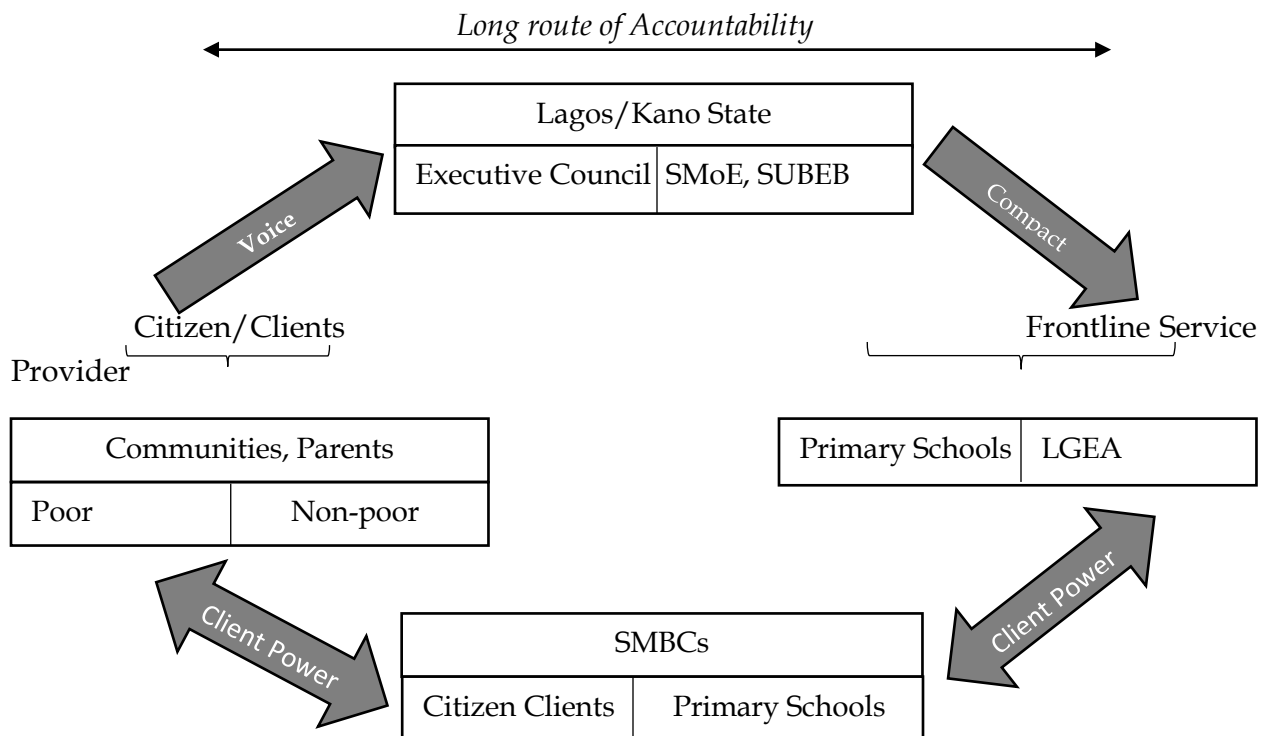
Organizations (CSOs) implemented a six-year programme (2009/2010-2016) to strengthen the capacity of SBMCs through trainings and follow-up mentoring visits (Pinnock 2014). Since 2010, it has activated and trained 10,437 SBMCs, with the Ministry of Education affirming their functionality based on pre-defined effectiveness criteria (see Table 1). The decision to forge partnerships at the outset was largely to strengthen the voice of SBMCs as well as to directly increase upward and bottom-up pressures via the long and short route of accountability.
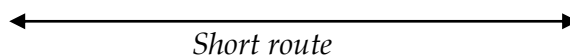
ESSPIN's intervention was driven by the strong performance of SBMs in other African countries and the evidence on empowering SBMs and improved education outcomes. For instance, in a systematic review of 26 impact studies that covered 17 school-based management interventions, Carr-Hill et al (2016) argue that 'school-based decision-making reforms appear to be less effective in disadvantaged communities, particularly if parents and community members have low levels of education and low status relative to school personnel' p.8).

Analytical Framework

The accountability framework for SBMs developed by World Bank (2004) is followed to analyze the paper's questions. In line with Hirschman (1970), it argues that citizen-clients' voice and power mediates the link between providers accountability and improved service delivery. Figure 1 below, shows that when beneficiaries (parents and communities) join school management the chain of accountability shortens, thus increasing the chances that frontline providers can be accountable for providing services.

Figure 1: SBMC Accountability Framework for Lagos and Kano State

Short route

Source: Author's illustration using Berrera-Osorio et al (2009, Fig. 1.4)
SMoE: State Ministry of Education.
SUBEB: State Universal Basic Education Board.
LGEA: Local Government Education Authority.

Analysis

To carry out this analysis, this study relied on data from ESSPIN's Composite Surveys (CS) conducted by Oxford Policy Management (OPM) in 2012 (CS1, baseline) and 2014 (CS2, mid-term)[3], respectively. Data was also derived from 'SBMC Resource Mobilization Validation Study' conducted by Usman (2016), while other published reports provided qualitative evidence. Evidence of actions taken, or motivated by SBMCs, is used as a barometer for *voice*. The impact of their activities on educational outcomes is used to examine the extent of accountability. Outcomes are analyzed at the school-level *(resource mobilization and school infrastructure),* teacher-level *(competence, head-teacher effectiveness, and presence)* and student-level (*enrolment, retention, progression, and test scores*). The functionality of SBMCs (Table 1) is used to show the dimensions along which SBMCs differ.

Baseline Characteristics of SBMCs in Lagos and Kano: SBMCs were first activated by ESSPIN in 2009/2010, while another set was created in primary schools in 2011/2012). They were eventually rolled out in all schools in Lagos and Kano in 2012/2013 and 2013/2014, respectively. In Lagos, each SBMC serves a 'cluster' of up to 10 schools (Hughes 2009), whereas in Kano, each school has an SBMC (Bawa 2009), due to distance between schools.

At the outset, findings from Hughes (2009) Bawa (2009) indicated that local elites (traditional leaders and head-teachers) captured and tightly controlled SBMCs. They also showed that education officials at the local-level exerted significant control over SMBCs. During focus group discussions, Hughes (2009, p.27) notes that '...members made it clear that they took instructions from and reported to LGEA [Service Providers]' (p.27). Most Committees were not democratic, or participatory, and poor community members were largely excluded. Although women participated in meetings, they held no leadership positions. These issues, considerably hindered the scope for collection action, especially

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[3] The end-line result of ESSPINs work on SBMCs is currently being completed, and thus publicly unavailable.

when combined with high levels of poverty within communities, limited operational resources, and lack of information about the role and responsibilities of SBMCs.

Functionality of SBMCs in Lagos and Kano: The functionality[4] of SBMCs, and their relevance to local education authorities, determine the extent to which they mobilized collective action. Survey data from Cameron and Ruddle (2015b) show that overall functionality of SBMCs in Lagos schools increased from 14 per cent in 2012 to 74 per cent in 2014, whereas it stagnated and remained low at 10 per cent in Kano(Cameron and Ruddle 2015a).

Table 1, below, demonstrates that SBMCs in Lagos have made progress in galvanizing local-level actors to push for improved education service delivery from both frontline service providers and local education authorities. However, SBMCs in Kano still face collective action problems. This is reflected in the fact that although they conducted awareness raising campaigns and networked with other local stakeholders (Criteria 2 and 3), the percentage of schools meeting SBMC functionality fell between CS1 and CS2. Variations in the functionality of SBMCs also point to the role played by contextual factors such as local politics, and the prevalence of poverty, in generating collective action.

Table 1: SBMC functionality in CS1 and CS2 (Lagos and Kano)

Criteria for functionality	Lagos			Kano		
	CS1 (2012)	CS2 (2014)	+/-	CS1 (2012)	CS2 (2014)	+/-
(1) 2+ meetings this school year	30.9	80.9	+	37.2	16.3	-
(2) Conducted awareness-raising activities	29.8	75.2	+	32.9	53.2	+
(3) Addressed exclusion by taking actions	21.8	40.6	+	24.3	16.6	
(4) Networked with CBOs/traditional and religious leaders/institutions/other SBMCs	5.1	66	+	8.8	56.9	+
(5) Interacted with local education authorities (LGEA) on education service delivery issues	16.4	43.7	+	16.3	11.6	
(6) Has women's committee	22.2	64.4	+	2.8	11	+
(7) Has children's committee	22.6	66	+	17	10.6	
(8) Contributed resources for school development	27.3	77	+	38	55.1	
(9) Chair visited school 3+ times from the start of new school year	10.6	51.6	+	21.3	6.4	-
Schools meeting functioning SBMC	14.4	74.3	+	19.8	10.3	

[4] The functionality standard is defined as fulfilling 5 out of 10 criteria in Table 1.

standard						
Number of SBMC functionality criteria met (/9)	2	5.6	+	2	2.6	
Additional criteria						
Action for commonly excluded groups	9.4	35.9	+	15.7	37.5	+
Raised issue of children's exclusion	1.4	40.6	+	7.4	18.3	

From table 1, the key dimensions along which SBMCs in Lagos and Kano differ are the number of meetings it holds (Criteria 1) as well as if the Chairman visits at least three times (Criteria 9) during the school year. This indicative evidence demonstrates the importance of leadership for the success, or failure of SBMs.

Collective and private actions: There is evidence, on average, that SBMCs take actions to improve educational outcomes. In both Lagos and Kano, they have been able to inspire actions through *SBMC/LGEA forums*, which includes all local education stakeholders. Durnin (2016) finds that traditional and religious leaders took direct actions to resolve issues raised after such forums. In Lagos state for instance, a religious institution rebuilt a previously vandalized school fence, while a traditional leader financed the hiring of 20 additional teachers for riverine schools facing shortages in teachers. In both instances, student enrolment increased, and children learnt in conducive and safe spaces.

Similar evidence of action is apparent in Kano state. Durnin (2016) documented two separate instances where SBMCs mobilized communities to contribute in building school infrastructure. In one of them, the construction of a junior secondary school block increased transition from primary to secondary education. More importantly, available evidence indicates that School Committees have partnered with religious and traditional leaders to reduce child/early marriage, increase girls access to schools, and improve child protection. However, despite these efforts, children dropping out of school due to issues related to poverty remain widespread. In this regard, Pinnock (2014) points out that there should be more focus on poverty as key barrier to education in Kano State.

Impact of SBMCs on school-level outcomes: SBMCs have been most effective in mobilizing cash and in-kind donations from communities to support school development. Data from Usman (2016) shows that SBMCs in ESSPIN supported states raised an equivalent of

GBP4.8 billion[5] between 2012 and 2015. Although resource mobilization largely reflects GDP rankings of respective states, Usman highlights that '…Kano's GDP is only 13% of Lagos GDP, [yet] it comes in a close second to Lagos in average amounts raised per SBMC…' (p.26). The high percentage of resources raised within communities (92.5%) point to strong local support for basic education. Unsurprisingly, SBMCs in the rural areas spent more resources on school infrastructure (construction/renovation), compared to their urban counterparts that spent more on teaching and learning quality (Usman 2016).

Impact of SBMCs on teacher-level outcomes: Although SBMCs in the urban areas spend part of their resources on teacher development, there is no direct evidence to link these efforts to improved teacher quality. Observed improvements in teacher competence and head-teacher effectiveness in ESSPIN-supported schools vis-à-vis other schools, largely reflects ESSPIN's work on teacher professional development (Cameron and Ruddle 2015b), as well as other government-led re-certification programmes for teachers.

Nonetheless, SBMCs have been key to reducing teacher absenteeism and lateness, incidence of sexual harassment, and bullying in schools, particularly in rural areas (Pinnock 2012). Boosting the voice of school children as well as encouraging their active participation in SBMC meetings have played a key role in this regard. By acting on children's reports SBMCs in Kano State improved teachers timelines and behavior (Pinnock 2014; Little and Pinnock 2014). SBMCs have also used their increased client-power to reverse the transfer of high performing head-teachers by local government education authorities. While this may be abused, it has created an incentive structure for teachers to work effectively and collaboratively with SBMCs and host communities to improve school governance.

Impact of SBMCs on student-level outcomes: Available evidence indicates that SBMCs play a pivotal role in increasing primary school enrolment and retention, especially for disadvantaged children and girls. This influence is however stronger in rural areas, compared to urban areas, highlighting the importance of community engagement in increasing the demand for education, and thus improving education systems. The increase in enrolment particularly evident in Kano. Between 2009 and 2013, the Annual School Census data revealed that enrolment in ESSPIN supported schools - with SBMCs, was more significantly higher (60 per cent) than state-wide enrolment increase (40 per cent) (Cameron and Ruddle 2015a).

Increased enrollment inadvertently affected the quality of learning, considering persistent supply-side challenges. According to Cameron and Ruddle (2015a), in Kano, average scores remained poor and unchanged between 2012 and 2014. Although Lagos recorded marginal improvements in children's learning outcomes (numeracy and literacy) in the same period

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[5] At an official exchange rate of 350 Naira to 1GBP.

(Cameron and Ruddle 2015b), this cannot be attributed to SBMCs. Two lines of reason may explain this. First, they have not functioned long enough to generate impact. For instance, it took at least 8 years for SBM reforms in the United States to yield significant test-scores (Osorio-Barrera et al 2009) Second, It is possible that there are other factors at play that affect children's ability to learn, even when they are in class. Poor child nutrition is a case in point.

Conclusion

Given a global learning crisis, emphasis has shifted from increasing school enrollment to ensuring inclusive and quality education for all (SDG 4). This piece argues that lack of accountability in the provision of public services affects the realization of this objective in the Global South. It presents evidence to show that increased citizen-clients' participation and voice via SBMCs can improve educational outcomes by strengthening accountability. The activities of SBMCs are shown to improve intermediate outcomes, but not children's learning. SBMCs also vary widely in functionality, with variations largely reflecting differences in contextual factors such as local politics and the extent of poverty. Successful and unsuccessful SBMCs seem to differ mostly on strength of leadership. These findings highlight the need for complementary demand-side informational campaigns that explicitly aim to raise parent's expectations and aspirations for their children. Future research should focus on how effective Committees influence local politics, but also how local communities affect the effectiveness of School Committees.

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