

AN ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE BASIC EDUCATION ASSISTANCE MODULE IN RURAL ZIMBABWE: A CASE STUDY OF BINGA DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

The government of Zimbabwe engineered the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) in a bid to provide assistance to the Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVCs). This study's main thrust was to assess the effectiveness of BEAM in achieving the intended goal in Binga District, Zimbabwe. The subject under investigation has not much been studied in Zimbabwe. However, the available literature recorded failure of BEAM to reach all the OVCs due to the high burden and need for OVCs in Zimbabwe, though success has been noted to some extent. The study employed the qualitative approach as it sought to discover the attitudes, feelings and perceptions of people in Binga in terms of the effectiveness of BEAM. Unfairness in the selection criteria of the BEAM beneficiaries, lack of financial and accounting skills and lack of proper auditing of BEAM funds in schools tied to be among the challenges of BEAM. Hence, the study concluded that BEAM did not manage to take all OVCs to school, as noted from failure to address irregularities.

Key terms: BEAM, OVC, Education, rural, government of Zimbabwe

Background

Binga District is one of Zimbabwe's 63 rural districts with an education system that is below standard due to inappropriate manning of the schools, poor learning conditions, and the infrastructure is not of high quality when compared to other learning environments. Binga has about 125 primary schools with 66 of them being annexes or unregistered (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Binga District, 2017, unpublished). The secondary schools in the district are about 43 and 13 of them are satellite schools. According to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) developed in the early 2000s with an intention of meeting its target by 2015 ensuring that all children acquire the basic education, Zimbabwe embarked on a program for achieving this goal by developing the Basic Education Assistance

Module (BEAM) in 2001 (Smith, Chiroro and Musker; 2012). The Report by the Ministry of Labour and Social Services on the management of basic education assistance module of 2014 denotes that BEAM program had a primary target of benefiting orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs) (aged between 6–19 years old), at primary and/ or secondary-school level. The beneficiaries were to include children who have never been to school or who have dropped out due to poverty or children who are currently in school but failing to pay the fees. According to the terms of BEAM, ten per cent (10%) of beneficiaries should be children with disabilities. Following a decade of a long socio-economic crisis in the country, the number of vulnerable groups has increased while Government funded social protection programs reduced significantly and the creation of a “Fair Economy” requires strong investment in social safety nets and welfare (Training and Research Support Centre, Zimbabwe Teachers Association; 2012). On the other hand, Government social protection coverage and actual expenditures have remained low, with administrative costs consuming the bulk of resources in most programs. Therefore, this study sought to investigate on how effective BEAM was in meeting the intended objectives in remote rural Zimbabwe.

Research design and setting

The study was conducted in 2 wards which are Muchesu and Saba of Binga District in Matabeleland north province, Zimbabwe. The study adopted a qualitative approach in data collection, analysis and presentation. Because of the differences in the data, how data is collected and analyzed, and what the data and analyses are able to tell us about the subjects of study, the knowledge gained through qualitative investigations is more informative, richer and offer enhanced understandings compared to that which can be obtained via quantitative research (Tewksbury, 2009). On the same note, qualitative research is based on a constructivist epistemology and explores what it assumes to be a socially constructed dynamic reality through a framework which is value-laden, flexible, descriptive, holistic, and context sensitive; that is an in-depth description of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the people involved (Yilmaz, 2013). Thus interviews and focus group discussions were employed to collect primary data from the participants. This was done to discover the feelings, attitudes, understanding, experiences and perceptions of people under study in terms of the effectiveness of BEAM in meeting the intended

objectives and outcomes. The qualitative methodological approach was adopted for the purpose of reaping its strength of in-depth investigation to discover a lot of issues pertaining to the aspect under study.

Sample and profile of respondents

A sample of 49 participants was purposively selected from a population of 2 wards (Saba and Muchesu) of Binga District, Zimbabwe. Of these participants, 21 were females and 28 males participated in the study. The participants' ages ranged between 21 and 60 years. The participants of the study included the School Development Committees (SDCs), youths, parents and guardians of OVCs, schools representatives and local leadership. The focus group discussions were conducted at ward level and people met on strategic points such as social centers where empirical data for this study was collected by the researchers. A small sample size was chosen for this study because it was best determined by the time allotted, resources available, and study objectives as supported by Patton (1990).

Instruments used in the study

A discussion questionnaire guide containing open-ended questions which required respondents to express their opinions and views on the effectiveness of the BEAM scholarship was used during the discussions. The questionnaire was developed by the researchers and put into the context that was simple for participants to fully understand and contribute meaningfully. The researchers used probing as a way to enhance the unleashing of the information which the participants were not sometimes willing to air out.

Data collection procedures

Permission for the study was obtained from the District Administrator, the Chief Executive Officer for Binga District and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE). The participants consented to take part in the study. The data was recorded in note books and later entered for cleaning using a computer. The people were divided into 4 groups per ward to identify the challenges and effects associated with BEAM and a plenary discussion was made thereafter.

Data analysis

Since the collected data was qualitative in nature, the content analysis technique was used to analyze the data from the field. The researchers read through the responses, aggregating content and identifying common themes from the different venues. Data was summarized, put into major themes and synthesized and analyzed with the lens of investigating the changes in the education results that BEAM brought in Binga district in terms of helping the OVCs as the primary target.

Ethical considerations

The study gave precedence to research ethics in order not to injure the participants and also to show the originality of the study. All the secondary sources were acknowledged. Informed consent was sought from the research participants, and their personal details were not recorded to ensure anonymity and to avoid being traced on any sensitive issues raised. Consent was sought from the participants to willingly and voluntarily participate into the study.

Selection of BEAM beneficiaries in schools

The parents and guardians of BEAM beneficiaries have indicated to have little knowledge on how the children were selected and even the qualifying standards for a child to be a beneficiary were not much revealed by the participants during the discussions in the 5 wards. One guardian iterated that; “*iswetuzikutibayiisimbabobasaluuzyabanaba BEAM muzikolo*” (we understand that teachers are responsible for selecting BEAM beneficiaries in schools). This has given much room for a biased handpicking of the wrong beneficiaries as the parents noted that the largest numbers of benefiting learners are those related to either the school administration bodies or the teachers themselves.

The SDC members reiterated that the process of selecting beneficiaries begin with a setup of a committee that is responsible for overseeing how the children are chosen and qualified categorically considering their orphan-hood and vulnerability. This explanation was interjected by local leaders (village heads) who pointed out that this is just theoretical and in real practice it is not what the school authorities were doing. Another participant described the method of

selection to be crooked as he said that; “*balatubzyakutitusaluuzyebanapesikumamaninobanabalaandwaasikabategwababbadalilwa a BEAM*” (they tell us to select the beneficiaries but at the end we observe that the same selected BEAM beneficiaries are turned back from school).

According to an old man who is a guardian to three orphans, the selection process does not follow the rightful procedures considering that the register of the OVCs with the village heads is given little attention during the process of selecting beneficiaries. During the discussions, it came up that the Child Protection Committees (CPCs) and the local leadership had a minimized interface in the protection of children especially on the aspect of the vulnerable ones accessing education.

Some school representatives in the wards which were under the study augmented that the relevant children to benefit from the BEAM funds were left out due to lack of registration documents such as birth and death certificates and national identity documents of their parents. One guardian registered her displeasure by noting that, “*does it mean that orphans should not access education like any other children because their parents died before they could register them?*” This same effect has indicated that most OVCs are not being able to transition with education from primary to secondary school due to lack of birth certificates. This has a negative effect on the educational outcomes for children living in rural areas of Binga as such services like birth and death registration are not situated in centers proximity to their access.

Payment of school fees by BEAM

In the two wards where this study was conducted, a majority of the SDCs acknowledged that BEAM has ceased paying school fees for OVCs around 2013. This was then compelling the school authorities to turn the children back home to remind their guardians and parents to pay the arrears due which they even hardly managed to raise. A government official attempted to refute such connotations by arguing that the government only delays in disbursing the funds but they do pay the fees. Such sentiments failed to hold much water as the primary school OVCs who graduated in 2014 have not made it to secondary level as they still owed the schools which withheld their Grade seven results.

A further probe during the discussions revealed that the school heads were not transparent when it comes to the fees disbursed by BEAM. The late transfers made by the government has given the school heads an upper hand in abusing the funds as the audit of these rural schools was limited especially by the external auditors. In addition to this, the heads of these rural schools failed to refund the money paid by guardians and parents of benefiting OVCs as soon as BEAM disbursed the school fees for them.

One SDC representative alluded that the failure lies in the hands of the school administrators who mix the BEAM funds with other funds in their recordings making it impossible for other finance committee members to have knowledge of whether these funds have been transferred or not. Hence this negatively affected the vulnerable children in their day to day learning when faced with such circumstances. However, this was refuted by a school head who argued that the schools could not be in a position to function smoothly without finance and BEAM had a bunch of uncleared arrears. This forced the guardians or parents to dig into their empty pockets in search for money as their children still had to attend school despite the limiting factors and the daunting poverty manipulating their survival. Some parents were surprised during the study to hear that BEAM was responsible for the examination fees of its beneficiaries as one participant confidently acknowledged this by saying that, “*imemutabingundiziubbadalamaliyakulembani CAMFED, aka kakuti BEAM ilabbadalaayilayonkapyakulindisweokuno*” (the organization that is known for paying examination fees for children is CAMFED, its new to us on hearing that BEAM also do pay examination fees for children).

BEAM beneficiaries’ performance.

The majority of the participants were of the opinion that although BEAM was helping to improve the basic education, especially in terms of numeracy and literacy in the rural Binga, not much has been realized in terms of pass rate. This is because there were irregularities in the selection process of the beneficiaries. Beneficiaries were dumped before they attained basic levels of education like grade seven, ordinary level and advanced level. One of the BEAM selection committee member in one of the wards said that; children’s fees were paid for only one

or two years and a new batch of beneficiaries was then selected, leaving the vulnerable children hanging without support.

Another factor pointed to be contributing to a failure by the vulnerable children to attain better grades at the end of their courses was the inability of the BEAM to provide material aid in the form of stationery and uniforms. Such materials are critical in the learning process of a child and most OVCs cannot afford to buy as noted by the one research participant who noted with concern that her granddaughter was staying at home despite being a BEAM beneficiary as she could not manage to supplement her with the materials to support her learning.

OVCs in the remote rural areas are too vulnerable as some are said to be heading their families or live with the old people who need their attention for survival. Such children are said to have resorted to early marriages as an alternative to counter their situational conditions in relation to poverty and social insecurities surrounding them. Although it is illegal for BEAM beneficiaries to be sent back after a delayed disbursement of their funds, school authorities in these rural areas found it easy doing that. One key informant retorted that; *“I always tell school management boards that BEAM beneficiaries should not be sent back home”*, but they just do this willy-nilly.

Major issues contributing to the failure of BEAM as a scholarship to effectively improve rural education.

From the study, the major issues pointed to be contributing to the failure of BEAM as a scholarship to address rural education were untimely disbursement of funds by the government to school accounts, lack of transparency by the school heads in the expenditure systems, poor methods of selecting beneficiaries and corruption within the selecting committees. All these indicators have shown that aspects of poverty-related circumstances also underlay the cause for poor outcomes despite the government interventions to upgrade the education systems in rural areas like Binga.

The Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) is one mechanism employed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Services to assist the OVCs in Zimbabwe. The government of Zimbabwe had been hit by the falling economy to enhance the BEAM assistance. The social protection

programmes such as BEAM have been heavily affected by limited fiscal space and the liquidity crunch in the country which has adversely affected the welfare of the poor, orphans and vulnerable children (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). On top of the series of economic challenges hitting Zimbabwe, BEAM was bedeviled by a wide variety of challenges like poor selection criteria by the school governance structures and exclusion of the OVCs in the programme. Thus, Mutasa (2015: 159) in her study findings prompted that “school heads... noted among other problems the inadequacy and erratic disbursement of funds which left them in a dilemma as to how many recipients were to benefit each year”. Such circumstances derailed the BEAM efforts and negatively affected its effectiveness in Binga District in one way or the other.

Despite the challenges noted, BEAM support has made an important contribution to many of the intended outcomes at school level, such as improving school attendance of BEAM beneficiaries and reducing the drop-out rate in Zimbabwe (Ministry of Labour and Social Services, 2012). Although such has been the case in other areas, in Binga District the situation was not the same since the school attendance was relatively low despite the presence of BEAM, and school drop outs have never declined accordingly. Harvey, Chiroro, and Musker, (2012) also noted that BEAM has contributed less to improving pass rates, improving school supplies such as furniture and introducing feeding programmes. Therefore, improving school attendance without subsequent improvement in educational outcomes would not be regarded as success in this study as results matter more than the processes.

The reduced interface among the stakeholders involved in the BEAM system has also given the BEAM chronic headaches that endangered its sustainability and effectiveness as a social protection model. Governance challenges in schools led to lack of accountability and transparency in BEAM funds. Findings by Training and Research Support Centre (TARSC) and Zimbabwe Teachers Association (ZIMTA) (2012) showed that once BEAM funds are disbursed to schools, 93% of the schools reportedly include these funds in the schools general accounts, which meant that they are not kept in a separate account. As noted in the findings section above, the SDCs got to be in dilemma to realize which funds belongs to where. This caused lack of accountability, especially with the caliber of the SDC members most of whom have low literacy levels and lack the accounting and financial background. Therefore, it would be fair to opine that

BEAM's effectiveness is manded with mixed feelings especially with regards to its intended outcomes.

Conclusion

From its inception, though BEAM had triggered success in terms of payment of school fees, the module lacked a wholesome approach in terms of assisting the OVCs. The study notes with concern that for a child to be in school, they do not only need school fees but rather a whole package that can capture their academic, economic and social wellbeing. Lack of such a model have caused children to drop out of school since the other pressing needs were not met in the home and society, hence discrediting BEAM. Therefore, BEAM may not totally be discarded but needs to be improved so that OVCs really benefit and errors of exclusion and other irregularities are ridden off.

Recommendations

- Community capacity building to enable communities in rural areas of Zimbabwe to demand and hold accountable the responsible authorities especially schoolheads on BEAM funds.
- Consistent external audit of schools' expenditures to ensure checks and balances on efficient utilization of funds.
- BEAM funding need to be whole encompassing by including the material things for school children.
- Government need to disburse BEAM funds timely to ensure smooth running of the educational institutions and also to ensure OVCs are not turned back to remind guardians to make payments.
- BEAM selection committees need to be trained and capacitated on how to select children to benefit from the BEAM scholarship.
- School heads need to ensure that the school expenditures are clear and transparent, with BEAM funds accounted separately.

- The governments of Zimbabwe need to re-think and re-strategize on the basic models that can work for assisting the OVCs especially in rural set-ups as the current programmes like BEAM leave a lot to be desired.

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