



## School Performance Review in collaboration with the Ministry of Education in Malawi

School performance review (SPR) is Link’s innovative approach to evidence-based school improvement. SPR supports schools to meet their annual planning obligations (required so they can receive government grants<sup>1</sup>), by enabling government officers and school leadership to measure individual school performance against national education quality indicators. Since 2006, SPR has been developed in partnership with the Ministry of Education in Malawi, leading to the integration of SPR approaches into the school improvement planning process, national training and protocols for inspectors and advisors, and alongside the development of the 2016 National Education Standards.

## The Evaluation

In 2022 Link commissioned the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change (ROC) at the University of Glasgow to conduct an independent evaluation of the extent to which SPR has been adopted, and the sustainability of school quality improvements brought about by SPR. Additionally, the evaluation aimed to understand whether any elements of the SPR process were sustained after Link ceased working directly with schools and district governments.

Data collection was carried out in May 2022 by ROC and researchers from the University of Malawi and Lilongwe Teacher Training College who spoke to school leaders and district officials in Dedza, where Link has worked since 2006, and Mulanje, where Link worked between 2009 and 2013, to create a narrative around the impact of SPR.

The full report is structured to provide background on the SPR process, describe the methods used in the evaluation, explore the research questions, and provide a conclusion.<sup>2</sup>

In brief, SPR supports government staff to collect data on school performance measured against national indicators. The data is analysed and fed back to the school in an accessible format. The headteacher shares the results, highlighting areas of strength and weakness, at a school-community meeting where the annual school improvement plan is collectively developed and tailored to address specific challenges. This evidence-based planning enables more efficient use of scarce resources.

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<sup>1</sup> Please visit our website for further information: <https://linkeducation.org.uk/strengthening-leadership-and-governance/> and our Evidence-Based School Improvement Approach Paper (add link)

<sup>2</sup> Please see the full report (available on request) for the research design and full details of the findings and recommendations.

## Findings

### 1. To what extent has school performance review (SPR) been adopted?

The research findings suggest that **the SPR process has been adopted and internalized as a ‘way of working’ at the district level**, with the School Improvement Cycle becoming the focal point for district office work planning. In their explanation of processes involved in SPR, Primary Education Advisors (PEAs) were able to explain the roles they played during the conception of the SPR activity and how they supported schools to adopt SPR processes. The study has established that PEAs were key players in the implementation and monitoring of SPR.

**SPR has also been adopted at school level**, with teachers reporting improvement planning as an effective way to address challenges and bring them to the attention of school leaders and district officials. Headteachers were facilitators of the SPR processes, while teachers, learners and community leaders all participated in the consultative processes that culminated in the development of evidence-based school improvement plans. It is interesting to note that headteachers did not report working directly with Link officers which demonstrates the effectiveness of Link’s strategy of working through existing education structures and government staff rather than Link’s own staff or processes. This approach made it easier for the adoption of SPR as the changes introduced were not perceived as externally induced but rather as an extension of government mandated requirements.

PEAs, headteachers and teachers were not only familiar with the SPR concept, but they were principal agents implementing the reform at the school level. Several headteachers involved in this study also commented on having acquired the capacity to better manage planning processes. One official explained how helpful the sharing of school improvement plans has been.

*“School improvement plans introduced through SPR reforms have been helpful. Headteachers are now able to procure textbooks using funds from the government which is being funded through SIG [School Improvement Grant] based on these plans”*

**- Primary Education Advisor, Mchinji**



## 2. To what extent have SPR processes produced sustainable changes in school quality?

The study found further evidence that SPR has produced sustainable changes in school quality, alongside improvements in retention and attainment. Informants attributed these improvements to the adoption of the SPR process which led to better planning and management.

*“There is a great change because maybe we can say about **70 or 75% of learners are here at school**, they go further with their education and **very few dropped [from] the school...It's because the schools put much effort into providing education to learners and those learners themselves see that these teachers want us to learn** so that we can make our future a fruitful future so **they like school and their parents also influence them to come to school.**”*

- Primary Education Advisor, Mchinji

*“Ah what has surprised us is that **the performance is improving** and the selection of learners from this school to secondary schools which has given us a picture that **we are improving as a school and has also made learners like school**. 2021 was our first year to produce the learners to go to secondary schools and about 22 learners were selected. **This year, we expect the number to increase** because we told the teachers in that Standard 8 class to deal with learners effectively so that we can make them pass their PSLC examinations.”*

- Headteacher, Mchinji

*“...through that training and orientation we were empowered. Through the innovation, **our learners have made a tremendous improvement** in terms of punctuality, class attendance, class performance and even in terms of dressing [school uniform]”*

- Headteacher, Mchinji

Given the size of the sample these findings cannot be seen as statistically significant or as final proof of impact. Nevertheless, they are powerful stories of positive change due to Link's school performance review.

In addition to this, the study also found sustainable changes in school – community relationships. Government officials and school leaders told us how the ownership of the school has grown so much for school communities that they have influenced the implementation of by-laws so that attendance can be improved.

*“In particular, at schools when we talk of stakeholders there are school management committees, these committees nowadays work very hard because they know that whatsoever they are doing at their school is theirs, so they have changed their mindsets while in the past they were taking the school as if it is not for them but the teachers. **Even Group Village Heads take part in mobilising learners to go to school, they even formed by-laws so that anybody absent should face the law**. The laws also fight against school dropouts, especially among girls who get married early or get pregnancies”*

- Primary Education Advisor, Mchinji

*“School review was helping us to know our strengths and our weaknesses for the sake of progress, so whenever they [LINK and PEAs] were visiting us, they were looking at successes and looking at challenges as well and maybe assist us on how those challenges could be assisted for the better of the institution, that's how it has worked”*

**- Headteacher, Dedza**

### **3. What happens to the SPR processes when Link’s engagement ceases? Are there any elements of SPR that are sustained?**

In the cases examined, key informants described working with processes analogous to SPR although often informants were not able to articulate SPR terminology. This suggests modes of working with SPR persist after the leadership and support of Link is withdrawn and stakeholders use their own words to describe the processes that they have adopted.

*“Schools have really improved and nothing has changed and we have improved for the better because we are still using the knowledge that Link left behind. The activities have been continued in the absence of Link”*

**- Primary Education Advisor, Mchinji**

It was found that two key pathways emerged as plausible reinforcers of SPR after Link’s withdrawal.

- 1. Data collection:** Firstly, data collection continued due to the internalisation of SPR practices by district offices. This was evidenced through school-level improvement planning continuing, possibly as a result of internalised practice, and also because of district improvement funds being subject to submission of improvement plans.
- 2. Community involvement:** Secondly, several informants cited community involvement as a reinforcing mechanism. Once communities had become engaged, they would continue to take interest in local schools. This acted as a reinforcement mechanism for educators and students – as well as a resource for schools who could tap into local communities for material and labour input. One official explains the extent to how the community was involved after Link’s interventions ceased.

*“...after Link left, we were not doing the programs on our own but **we were involving the community, even the learners.**”*

**Primary Education Advisor, Mchinji**



## Future considerations

The study suggests that there are opportunities for improvement through facilitating communities of practice where headteachers can learn from one another and future research may want to consider the spill over effects of SPR from targeted schools to non-targeted schools in the surrounding area.

Link will continue to work closely with our partners in the Ministry of Education to bring about sustainable improvements in education systems, school quality and ultimately learning outcomes.

