Link Education's Approach to Value for Money

Summary

Link Education places value for money at the heart of its work and emphasises equity in achieving it. Maximising resources to ensure the best possible education outcomes for children, particularly for those most marginalised and vulnerable, is of paramount importance to Link.

A small, lean, and adaptable organisation, with a diverse range of staff and expertise, Link works in partnership with existing education structures, schools, and communities to achieve national and international education goals[1]. Working through existing structures contributes to the sustainability of Link's work, meaning that finite resources reach further than can be achieved by a time-limited project. Our model develops capacity, avoids costly duplication of efforts, and forges partnerships, enabling Link to leverage further resources for education.

Link considers value for money from programme design to delivery, including monitoring and evaluation, constantly learning how value can be increased through the framework of efficiency, economy, effectiveness, and equity for all children. Accountability and transparency are central to this process, with the set-up of adaptive management processes, community engagement, and participant feedback mechanisms to ensure that the use of resources is informed by participants in the project and other key education stakeholders.

About Link

Link Education is an international education charity, working with Link Ethiopia, Malawi, and Uganda as a family of organisations, to improve education for children and communities in some of the poorest rural areas and help thousands of people escape the cycle of poverty. We focus on enhancing teaching and learning in schools, as well as building life-skills and promoting inclusion for the most marginalised. Our vision is one where all children have access to good quality education, giving them hope and a strong foundation for a brighter future. We take both a top-down and bottom-up approach to transform education, supporting broad system and school-wide improvements while recognising the need for more tailored, localised support to overcome specific challenges.

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[1] Sustainable Development Goal 4; Ethiopia Education Development Roadmap 2018-30
[2] Department for International Development (2019), Guidance on VfM for External Partners. https://www.ukaiddirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Equity-and-VfM-Guidance-2019_FCDO_EXTERNAL.pdf;

Approach

Link's approach to value for money is best described as making the best possible use of existing resources, to achieve the greatest and most equitable value for children and their education in the short and long term. Working in partnership with existing education offices and staff, and with schools and communities to strengthen systems, is a value for money approach. Link firmly believes in this approach which develops the capacity of both partners and project staff and promotes the effectiveness and sustainability of project interventions.

Across our five organisational strategic goals, Link invests in strong situational analyses to inform sustainable and inclusive programme design, ensuring that resources are allocated based on a sound understanding of context, and directed towards removing the real education barriers and challenges that children face. Analysis, programme design and planning are led by diverse education stakeholders from all levels of government, schools, civil society organisations and communities. This ensures that precious resources are directed towards where the need is greatest, and they will make the most difference. Those who face the greatest barriers to accessing quality education in context are central to analysis. This group typically includes girls, especially from rural areas, and children with disabilities. Safeguarding, child protection, and Do No Harm principles are embedded in all stages of the project cycle.

During project implementation Link supports those responsible for the delivery of specific trainings within the existing system, to train participants within the project. This leverages on already existing human resources, who will continue to deliver training or continuous professional development into the future and avoids costly duplication of efforts. It might include for example, a workshop which prepares key trainers to deliver a gender and inclusion-responsive pedagogy training to teachers as part of their continuous professional development. It might include a workshop with school Girls' Education Advisory Committees (GEACs) to deliver social and emotional support sessions to girls identified to need it in school. It might include supporting district or school level staff to lead on school performance review and school improvement planning in which school communities and students participate.

Our adaptive management process ensures Link's project activities are jointly monitored by Link staff and relevant government counterparts with the results being discussed at regular review meetings. This process ensures early identification or confirmation of the most impactful interventions linked to intended project outcomes, enabling subsequent adjustment and redirection of resources as required. This joint process promotes transparency, partnership, trust, ownership, and shared learning.

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[2] Strengthen education systems, Transform girls' education; Engage community voice and accountability; Build climate change resilience; Support education in emergencies

Equity cuts across programme design, delivery, monitoring, evaluation and learning in Link. We consider how different barriers to education intersect to exclude some children from school, and ensure that resources are directed towards relevant, effective, and sustainable measures to support the access of the most marginalised children to school, their participation, and learning. The views of diverse participants in the project are important at each stage.

Experience

ETHIOPIA:

In Ethiopia, where a major focus is teacher professional development, the Link Ethiopia team work in close partnership with government and a wide range of education stakeholders. As a sustainability measure, the small Link programme team provide a training or orientation workshop for key trainers who are selected from relevant structures including regional colleges of education, local government education offices, and school leaders. These key trainers then deliver training using materials developed for context and aligned with existing continuous professional development processes. This approach helps to embed capacity within already existing structures, and increases sustainability beyond the project timeframe, meaning that more value is created from project resources. As an example of our leverage, in one project which operates in the schools of four districts out of a total 22 in Wolaita zone, the zonal education bureau has employed the key trainers to roll out gender and inclusion responsive pedagogy and leadership training to the remaining 18 districts. This initiative has vastly increased the project reach with thousands more girls and boys benefitting from the project.

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[4] See Link's School Performance Review (SPR) approach paper at www.linkeducation.org.uk
[5] See Link's Adaptive Management Approach Paper at www.linkeducation.org.uk

MALAWI:

In Malawi the project team has worked with the relevant government partners, schools, communities, and disability organisations to ensure that the education needs of children with disabilities are met. To guarantee that resources are used equitably and inclusively, assistive devices have been provided to students who might otherwise be excluded from education altogether. Care is taken to ensure that devices provided are the ones which best meet a student's needs, can be procured, maintained, and replaced locally, and that can be used effectively by students with teachers supporting in project schools. To ensure that this support is effective and in the best interests of the students, a careful process of identification, assessment and procurement is undertaken by those qualified to assess, recommend, supply, and provide ongoing support.

UGANDA:

In Uganda, Link use robust procurement processes which are regularly revised, and which emphasise value for money. Deciding how to spend allocated resources, the Senior Management Team consider pricing and specifications as well as the quality of items to be purchased in relation to what is needed by those who will benefit. They also consider the efficiency of the procurement process in selecting the seller, ensuring that resources are not wasted and are spent within procurement policy and budget timelines. A procurement committee sits to conduct background checks on suppliers, update administration and maintain a qualified supplier list. At least three quotes are sought for items to be purchased, before deciding which option offers the best quality, considering the different and diverse needs of those who will benefit, within allocated resources. The process balances economy with efficiency, effectiveness, and equity.