

# *Lessons Learned from the Gansu Basic Education Project (GBEP)*



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## Abbreviations

CE	Cambridge Education
CEP	County Education Bureau
CW	Civil Works
DFID	Department for International Development
EMIS	Education Management Information System
EP	Education Planning
EYE	Early Years Education
GBEP	Gansu Basic Education Project
GPED	Gansu Provincial Education Department
HTT	Headteacher training
IEP	Individual Education Plan
MoE	Ministry of Education
MTR	Mid-Term Review
NER	Net Enrolment Rate
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NWNU	Northwest Normal University
PMO	Project Management Office
PPMO	Provincial Project Management Office
SDP	School Development Planning
SDSG	Social Development Support Team
SEN	Special Education Needs
SLP	School Location Planning
SR	Supplementary Readers
SUBEP	Support to Universal Basic Education Project
WB	World Bank

## FOREWORD

The Gansu Basic Education Project (GBEP) was designed in 1998 and implemented between 1999 and 2006.

The project was deliberately designed to pilot a number of new approaches to education reform in poor rural areas. Overall, and in all the key areas, it was deemed to be very successful. But, there were unsuccessful activities too.

Because it was a pilot project, there was a substantial budget for dissemination in order to share the experiences and lessons learned. This allowed widespread and detailed knowledge of the project's experiences to be shared at both a national and international level.

Many of these lessons have been incorporated into new work in China, both donor and government funded. It is also generally accepted that many of the lessons learned are not context-specific and have much wider application to education reform generally.

At the end of the project in 2006, DFID commissioned Cambridge Education to produce this report – the authors were the members of the technical assistance management team. In addition, an accompanying film has been produced and a series of interviews recorded with key participants in the project – these are available on a DVD.

We have been privileged to play a part in supporting this innovative and influential project and are honoured to have been invited to contribute to this reflection on experience. We hope that it will assist others in both design and implementation of education projects, whether in China or further afield.

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## **1. CONTEXT OF GBEP**

### **1.1 Background**

The Gansu Basic Education Project (GBEP) was designed to help the Chinese government to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2005 and Universal Basic Education by 2010 in Gansu Province. The purpose of the project was “to have more boys and girls entering and completing the primary and junior middle school cycles in Gansu, especially in the four target counties, and to reduce inequalities within the educational system”<sup>1</sup>. After six years of implementation, the project attracted considerable interest especially within the education development community both at national and international level. By 2006 it was probably the best known foreign funded education project in China. It was recognised by British PM Tony Blair, visited by Princess Anne and by Paul Wolfowitz, Head of the World Bank, and has received many accolades from well known educators.

More importantly though, local people – the beneficiaries – praised the project as extremely effective compared to many other education projects. Several independent reviews reported very high degrees of confidence among local respondents in the sustainability of GBEP initiatives.

GBEP has generated a lot of publicity in local, national and international media. In turn this has prompted many to ask why GBEP has achieved what it has, how it has done this and what kind of lessons could be learned by other donors, education projects and education officials ?

Although there are plenty of success stories in the project, it is also relevant to ask - are there also lessons from its failures, or aspects that did not work well? What would the managers of the project do differently now if they had the chance to implement the project again?

This report tries to address these questions.

### **1.2 Project Scope**

The Gansu Basic Education Project was conceived in 1997 as part of DFID’s new poverty focused policy for development assistance. A visit by then Secretary of State for DFID, Clare Short, set the broad agreement for a joint project. A scoping visit by DFID in 1998 outlined the broad parameters and two design missions led by Cambridge Education<sup>2</sup> in 1998/99, working with the Gansu Provincial Education Department (GPED), helped to define the project assistance. The project was formally launched on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1999 in Lanzhou.

GBEP operated mainly in four of Gansu’s poorest counties in Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture: Kangle, Hezheng, Jishishan and Dongxiang. Teacher

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<sup>1</sup> GBEP Logframe 3<sup>rd</sup> revised version

<sup>2</sup> Until 2005 known as Cambridge Education Consultants (CEC) Ltd.

training and institutional support was more widely focused on provincial level organisations. The project was managed by the Gansu Provincial Education Department with support from a team of international and national consultants provided by Cambridge Education, UK.

GBEP was designed as a pilot project. It set out to test new approaches to familiar educational problems including low enrolment rates, especially for minority girls, high drop-out rates and a poor learning environment. Its aim was to disseminate successful practice to other parts of Gansu and other poor areas in China.

### **1.3 The Situation in 1999**

The situation of basic education in the four counties in 1999 is evident from pictures at the time – dilapidated buildings, often unsafe, housing dirty, cold children in cramped conditions were quite normal. Few teachers had received in-service training and the only resources in schools were a few textbooks and perhaps the negligible remains of equipment or books from government or non-government channels. And yet, parents had to pay considerable sums of money – often as much as a quarter or their disposable income per child (Bray 2004) - for the privilege of sending their children to “study” in these schools. Drop-out after grade 2 was significant and it was rare to find any girls in Grade 4 or beyond.

The most surprising aspect of this system was not that there were low rates of enrolment and high rates of drop-out, but that so many children attended at all.

Perhaps more alarming than the physical conditions were the psychological conditions of those in charge of the education system, both educators and officials. Yes, the system was broken they admitted; yes, many remote schools were dangerous and understaffed; yes, they openly favoured county and centre schools when handing out limited resources. But, there was little they could do about it, they were powerless. There were not enough resources and anyway, who was going to change the system?

Everyone knew change was needed, everyone knew the system was functioning well below par, but, no one had a plan for what to do about it. All denied responsibility – the system was to blame (and usually nameless officials at higher levels) – the overwhelming impression was one of paralysis.

Many attempted to blame the poor for not sending their children to school. “They don’t value education” was a familiar refrain which occasionally bordered on discrimination when it was used to explain differences between the Han and other minority groups.

These arguments led to a vicious circle in which the failure of the poor to spend their own hard earned cash on this poor quality education became the justification for not allocating resources to improve the quality of education in minority areas. The officials who did not subscribe to these arguments were in a minority.

## **2. ACHIEVEMENTS OF GBEP**

Faced with such a bleak analysis many commentators regard the scale and scope of the project achievements as remarkable given the time span of only 6 years. In particular, it is worthy of note that the achievements of the project are spread across a very wide range of education areas or disciplines – from reformed teaching practice to a dramatically improved education management information system.

In this report there is space only to summarise the achievements, but the range of areas covered shows that the project had an impact on the whole of the education system in these counties, not just one or two aspects of it. Looking first at the overall indicators of improvement we find the following:

- Outstanding improvement in enrolment rates in primary schools and junior middle schools, reduced dropout rates and increased completion rates in the four counties compared to the situation prior to 1999. Overall primary NER rose by 13% in 6 years and Girls GER by a significant 22%. The project achieved almost all its targets and exceeded some, especially in girls' enrolment.
- Children have become more confident in their learning and express significantly more enjoyment in school as a result of the improvements in making a more child-friendly learning environment. Although in such a short time changes in learning achievement are hard to attribute to the project, there is anecdotal evidence suggesting achievement is rising.
- More difficult to quantify, but no less significant, has been the changes of attitudes in all parts of the education service. From teachers who have adopted and mastered a child centred methodology of teaching; headteachers who have stronger leadership skills, more democratic management practices and better communication with their staff and students; and education officials who have developed stronger professional skills and a new service ethos towards schools.
- Most important, given the long term nature of education interventions, has been the building of local capacity. In many areas capacity has been strengthened: in teaching ability, in school management, in education management in bureaus, in research ability in teacher training institutions, in the ability to develop locally relevant materials, in the understanding of disadvantage and equity, in the approach to children with SEN, etc. Of course, the test of this capacity building will be in several years time, but, indications now suggest it has been far more successfully rooted as a result of this project than by previous interventions.

All these achievements have been aided by a design which aimed for a change in the *education system* not just one or two areas. Other projects in China have only tended to focus on building schools or training teachers. GBEP was unusual in the breadth of the interventions designed – over 14 different aspects of the education system. And it was the combination of changes being made in many aspects of the education system at the same time, together with the fact that many of the same educators and officials



were involved in several interventions at the same time - that created an accelerator effect for change in Gansu.

In total GBEP supported change in more than a dozen areas of the education system all of which could be categorised under the headings: *Hardware*, *Software* and *Getting Research into Policy and Practice (GRIPP)*.

## **2.1 Hardware**

### **Sustainable and Improved School Building Programme (Civil Works)**

The Civil Works programme provided for the building or rehabilitation of over 200 schools. The design used was modified from local designs and improved. Simple changes such as lower blackboards (so children could use them), south facing and larger windows plus false ceilings (to improve heat retention and reduce use of coal) improved water supply and cleaner toilets. Additional facilities were provided for disabled students in the form of ramps and handrails leading into classrooms and in toilets.

### **Creating an Enriched Learning Environment for Children**

Besides the buildings, some of the funds were allocated to providing learning materials for children, plus many cards and coloured paper for early year teachers to make participatory activities for / with children.

Taking account of the demands for reference books, especially new curriculum related books for teachers, the project also funded new books for teachers and teaching research staff to update their knowledge. Project provided equipment for physical education were extremely popular in schools. For example : table tennis, basketball, and inexpensive children's games equipment such as hoops and skipping ropes. All these made the school and playground to be a happy place and attractive to local communities. It is notable that the procurement process was participatory so that teachers, headteachers and children had some voice in deciding what to buy. The project specially provided RMB 2,000 to each school through a programme called 'Happy Campus' – designed to attract children to school by making the environment welcoming and fun.

## **2.2 Software**

### **Improved Education Management through School Development Planning**

School Development Planning (SDP) brought schools and local communities together to create a unified approach to the school's development. It changed the relationship between the school and the county from a traditionally "top down" one to a more "bottom-up" one. It did this by giving schools more involvement in their own development. It also changed the relationship between schools and communities by

bringing them closer together and focusing on some of the social development aspects of education that prevent children entering, staying and achieving in schools.

### **Implementation of the New National Curriculum through Participatory Approaches to Teaching**

GBEP improved the way primary and junior middle school teachers are trained and focused especially on strengthening teachers' ways of teaching rather than content knowledge. It did this by introducing participatory approaches in training and analysis, by exposing trainers to new ideas, new materials and new ways of teaching and - most importantly - by focusing on the needs of the child. Emphasis was also placed on using locally available and low cost materials in all teaching, and on ensuring that disadvantaged groups of pupils (such as girls or slow learners) were given greater consideration by teachers. These new approaches reinforced and were reinforced by the interventions in EYE, SEN and Supplementary Readers.

### **Experimental Strategies to Improve Access Especially for Girls**

GBEP piloted a number of different access strategies both small and large scale. Of these, the most important was the scholarships programme. This programme provided support to over 11,000 primary and 3,000 junior middle school pupils. Each pupil received a scholarship for their whole time in school. Selection criteria were developed locally that prioritised the poorest and most disadvantaged children such that 70% of the support went to girls and 70% to minority children. After the second year of the project all new scholarships were given to minority girls as these were clearly the most disadvantaged group.

Other strategies piloted included providing free lunch to children, posting female teachers to remote schools, encouraging the development of child friendly campuses (called the Happy Campus programme), training female community members, setting up social development support groups etc. All the strategies had a joint impact on helping to improve the enrolment rate, completion rate, and reduce the drop-out rate.

### **Strengthened Retention Through a Focus on Early Years' Education (EYE)**

EYE concentrated attention on improving the ability of teachers to teach children in Grade 1 and 2 in order to provide a solid foundation and counter the tendency for high levels of drop out in Grade 3. Through these approaches children have more fun in learning at the beginning stage of schooling, increasing their motivation to attend and learn. GBEP achieved this by training teachers to use a more child-centred teaching methodology and to create a more child-friendly classroom environment. The project provided half-hexagonal desks to students, encouraging group activities and participatory learning, provided big books for whole class teaching often developed by local teachers and researchers using locally relevant content.

### **New Approaches to Children with Special Education Needs (SEN)**

Training and development of materials in SEN raised the awareness of children with special education needs widely among teachers, headteachers, education officials as well as community members. It also changed local peoples' attitudes and brought

many disabled children into mainstream schools where before local wisdom said they should stay at home or go to special schools. It did this by developing SEN modules both for teacher training and headteacher training; by training all the teachers and headteachers with SEN module; by introducing Individual Education Planning (IEP) to schools in the project areas so that SEN children were viewed as individuals with special needs ; and by setting up SEN group in each county to support all the activities in this component.

### **Improved Resources for Teachers and Children through Locally Relevant Supplementary Readers (SR)**

This innovation aimed to improve the language ability of students in poor and minority areas. It developed 24 pictures books that aimed to be helpful to language acquisition while also focusing attention on social issues such as gender and ethnic discrimination, disability and the environment. The development of these materials was influenced by findings of a project in 2002 examining the representation of ethnic minorities and women in national textbooks<sup>3</sup>. The Supplementary Readers were written by local people and aimed at the majority Muslim population being served – they were warmly welcomed right because of this character. This development gave practical support to teachers in Grades 1 to 4 who were introducing participatory approaches – these books was accompanied by a teachers guide with practical suggestions and exercises teachers could use.

### **Greater School Autonomy through Head Teacher Training (HTT)**

Support to improved Headteacher Training helped build management and leadership capacity substantially in the four target counties. Combined with training and interventions in SDP and inspection the headteacher training has led to a noticeable improvement in schools own ability to self develop. The training did this by developing a set of short, practical training modules for all serving and newly appointed head teachers in the 671 primary schools and 47 secondary schools. The modules were delivered separately over two-years and comprised: 1) Teaching Support, 2) Education Equity, 3) Monitoring and Evaluation on School Development, 4) Special Education Needs, 5) Whole School Reform, 6) School Leadership and Management, 7) School Reform and Development Sustainability.

### **Stronger Focus on Standards and Achievement through a New Approach to Inspection**

Changing the way schools did development planning and taught the new national curriculum without changing the inspection system would have led to a mismatch where inspection was looking at the wrong things. So, GBEP developed and implemented a new inspection system that focuses on children's achievement and asks how well teaching and learning and school management are contributing to this. Much of the evidence to answer these questions is gained through classroom observation, with the School Development Plan providing evidence of the quality of management. The project supported the development of an Inspection Framework

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<sup>3</sup> "Gender analysis of the textbooks and teaching materials in K-9 schools and informal adults' literacy learning" founded by the Ford Foundation, 2000-2003

and an Inspection Guidance Manual both of which are available to schools as well as inspectors. Inspectors were drawn from project counties and non-project counties (to allow for independence of judgements) and also included some headteachers (who benefited from learning about other schools and were able to provide advice from their own experience).

### **Introduction of Evidence Based County Education Planning (EP)**

After two years of School Development Planning and the introduction of a new EMIS system, it was clear that County level education planning was needed to capture the changes taking place and point the direction for the future. Key officials in each county education bureau were trained and produced a 3 year rolling County Education Plan. A set of Planning Guidelines was produced and County Education staff became more aware of their role as coordinators and champions of change.

### **Better Data Management through an improved Education Management Information System (EMIS)**

A comprehensive approach to the local EMIS introduced by the project focused on gathering data at student rather than school level. This has allowed for a much richer data set including the ability to follow pupils as they change school or drop out. Through this improved and expanded EMIS, county education officials and headteachers have a much clearer idea of the problems they face in enrolment and retention, can target students or groups of students who have difficulties and can tailor their strategies more effectively.

### **An Objective System of School Location Planning (SLP)**

SLP was introduced to introduce an objective and data based system of choosing the most needy areas to build, rehabilitate or expand schools. Prior to this, the decisions on school location were not made in a transparent manner and often led to unnecessary duplication.

### **Increased Funds for Equipment and Training through County Education Budget Reform**

GBEP also aimed to reform the way in which County Education Bureaus budgeted for education. A commitment from each county to increase overall spending on education and increase the proportion of spending devoted to non-personnel costs was included as a condition in the project. At the end of the project, the counties have committed themselves to sustaining this level of funding thereby offering the prospect of sustained change being funded. Distribution of funds to schools was developed through the use of a formula based on student numbers which gave more value to the students in the most disadvantaged schools.

## **2.3 Getting Research into Policy and Practice (GRIPP)**

Research in this context is defined quite widely to include traditional studies, reviews and surveys but also planning and policy making that uses objective evidence as the main base of decision making.

### **Adjusting Policy and Practice According to Objective Evidence**

GBEP set up a good system to adjust policy and practice according to the findings of periodic monitoring as well as annual reviews and specially appointed independent reviews.

For example, regular monitoring of the textbook revolving fund found that there were severe problems in implementation. This led to a review which recommended cessation of the activity.

A specially commissioned review of the scholarships programme in the second year of the project produced evidence of imperfect targeting of minority girls. This review, combined with baseline data that highlighted minority girls as the most disadvantaged group in the project area, led to a decision to allocate all new scholarships (from children graduating) to minority girls.

The county level education planning activity used participatory meeting with headteachers to inform the county planners about key bottlenecks in the system. These were built into the county education plans in the targets and actions to be funded over succeeding years.

In daily project management, the close monitoring jointly by the consultant team and PMO officials provided many strong pieces of evidence for policy making and adjusting practice (see 3.2.5 Project Monitoring and Evaluation section for details).

### **Research Focused on Practical Issues**

Through the research component, the research capacity of local researchers and research institutions was improved. GBEP set up 10 research topics all related to project activities, such as ‘Action Research on Girls’ Education’, ‘The Impact of Participatory Teaching in Normal Schools’ ‘Education Cost Sharing Research’, etc. As a result local researchers began to focus on education practice and real problems in rural education instead of academic and theoretical research.

The project also supported 50 students to undertake a specially designed Masters Degree programme in primary education. Many of these students were from the four project counties. All were required to do their dissertations on an aspect of primary education in the project area. These best of these were selected for publication.

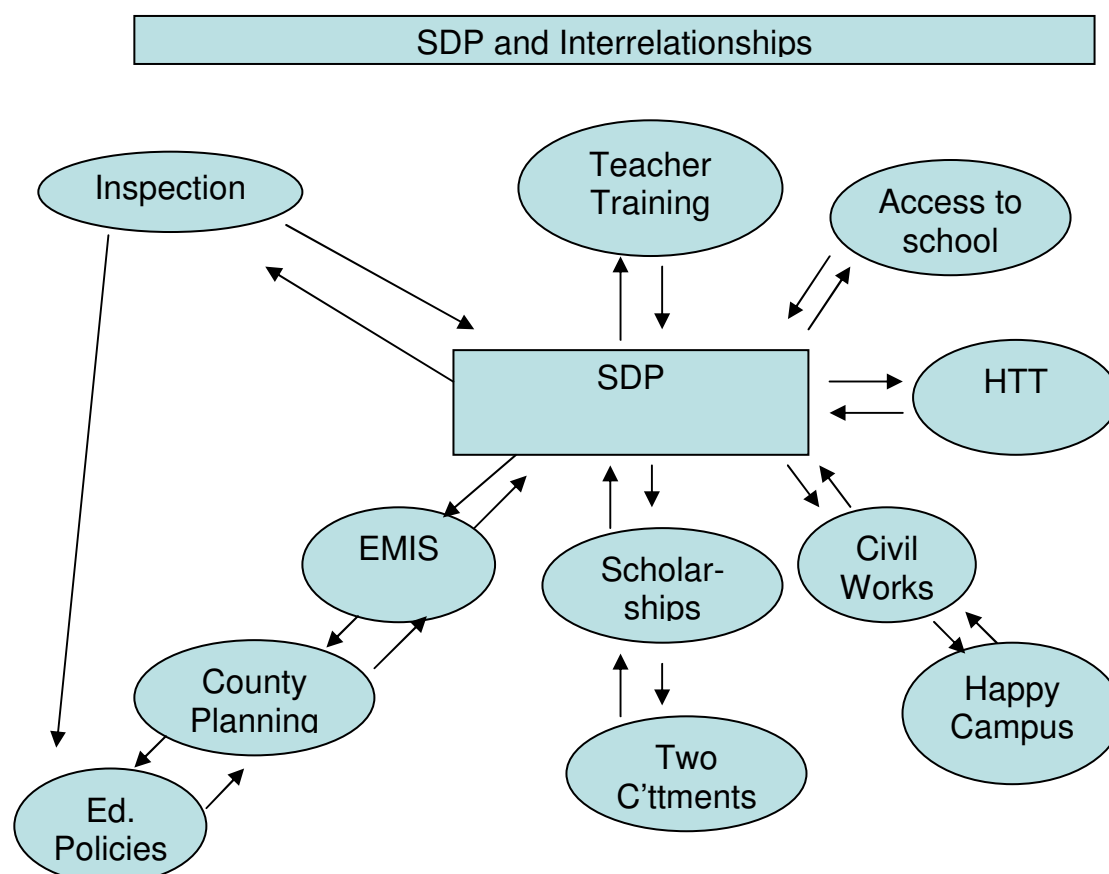
As the Chinese saying goes: “among ten fingers, some are longer than others”. Likewise, among all the components above, there are some differences in term of scope, success and sustainability, but overall, the successes in each component have reinforced the efforts in other components and helped create an integrated approach to education system reform.

### 3. LESSONS LEARNT FROM PROJECT DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION AND MANAGEMENT

#### 3.1 Project Design

One of the most important elements of GBEP was the well-designed structure of the project. Because the project only covered 4 counties it was also easier to design a series of interventions that were comprehensive in scope.

As mentioned above, different components were inter-related and supported each other. For example, as the pilot EMIS programme began to be established, the SDP training and guidance from the CEBs was modified to make sure this new source of data was fed into the school plans. Those plans in turn form the basis of the new inspection system – in fact they are the first document inspectors request on their visit to schools. The inspectors reports that are then produced highlight areas of strength and weakness across the county and aggregated judgements drawn from these inform county education planning.



The independent consultants leading a review of the GBEP learning environment commented: *“All in all, it is difficult to conceive of a project that could have been better linked: in conception and in practice. The impact that ‘joined up thinking’ has had on project success, in itself deserves to be recognised as a key lesson for*

*anyone who wishes to be inspired by, and build upon, the GBEP project experience.*<sup>4</sup>

### 3.1.1 The Strengths of the Design

*What I appreciated most in this project was that, before the project was launched, the participatory needs analysis was carried out, even before the baseline study. GBEP was not an imported project, but a localised one.*

*Prof. Zheng Xinrong, social development consultant, interviewed by China Development Brief.*

What were the strengths of the GBEP design? Three key elements can be identified:

Firstly, *the design process itself was participative*. A good deal of effort was made to ensure that different stakeholders were involved and their voices could be heard. All three design missions involved consultation workshops, participative sessions on developing the logframe and discussions about the draft project memorandum. This was the first step for most local people to understand that they would have ownership in the project.

The second element was *the flexible approach* characteristic of DFID projects. For example, despite not favouring provision of civil works in principle, the DFID team realised that ensuring commitment from local beneficiaries and stakeholders would be easier if their key request was met part way. Thus, 30% of the project funds were allocated to building and rehabilitating new schools. This proved to be a farsighted move as it *allowed some early wins in the project* – communities were inspired to participate by seeing schools being built, officials could point to tangible successes and SDP started well because the pilot schools were mostly receiving civil works.

Left at this GBEP would be no different from many other projects in China. But, the civil works programme was also used as a vehicle for other initiatives in the project. Firstly, raising the standards of design, construction and maintenance of schools. Strict quality criteria were applied to design and construction and, as a result, much better buildings were built. Policies were developed on health, hygiene and maintenance and training given to teachers and headteachers which led to sustainable improvements. Secondly, in many cases villagers were inspired by the new buildings to both send their children to school and to take part in SDP because they were proud of the new schools. Finally, the civil works programme was used to introduce the idea of the “child friendly school”. Emphasis was put on designing grounds and play equipment that created a child-friendly learning environment.

DFID projects are generally very flexible. Changes can be made to activities all the way through the project life if a strong justification can be made. This encourages a spirit of experimentation because *failure means change, not rejection*.

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<sup>4</sup> David Smawfield, Yongfeng Du, Building Children's Schools: Transforming the Learning Environment. Gansu Children's Publishing House, 2006

The third positive aspect of the design was unintended – namely that the same members of the design team became the core members of the implementation team. Cambridge Education helped design the project and then won the contract to provide TA support during implementation. This ensured a much higher degree of continuity than normal and avoided the common phenomenon of consultants in the implementation phase trying to change the project design (often because they do not understand the background).

***Learning Points:***

- ***Good design came from a participative design process and a flexible DFID approach which helped to create some early wins.***
- ***Consistency of personnel between the consultant design team and the consultant implementation team enabled a smooth start.***

### **3.1.2 The Weaknesses of the Design**

The main weakness of the design was that it was too short. There were only two visits of two weeks by the consultancy team – to help design a £14 million project. Participation was initiated but to a limited extent.

Linked to this was the difficulty of getting good and reliable data. County officials were even reluctant to take the project design team to teaching points and village schools for fear of losing face. The weakness of the data gathered led to a lot of work having to be done on revision of the project logframe in the first 9 months of the project.

The final design visit was by a DFID Appraisal team. This team changed several key elements of the project memorandum – for example, the description of the two commitments. Without the support of knowledgeable national consultants on this team the result appeared to be fine in English but when translated into Chinese was unclear. The first three visits by the finance consultants were spent renegotiating with all stakeholders what the two commitments meant. What was finally agreed and acted on bears little relation to what is written in the Project Memorandum.

Another issue was the limited preparation done by DFID to explain to the GPED how this project would differ from what they were used to – especially World Bank projects. In particular, the role of consultants was very unclear and yet they played a pivotal role in both technical support and management. This led to many difficulties in the first year of the project.

Finally, the design suffered from a weakness common to most projects – overestimation of local capacity. Assumptions were made about the ability of local officials and educators to shoulder responsibilities under the project that turned out to be quite inaccurate. Assumptions were also made that GPED would make good staff available (because GPED gave such assurances at design). However, in the early years there was a lack of continuity of key staff since the staff assigned found their work was not recognised when being considered for promotion and there was no additional reward for the extra work required.



***Learning points:***

- *A short design may limit the participation of stakeholders.*
- *Local knowledge is very important and the involvement of a national specialists – especially where finance is concerned – is essential*
- *Better preparation and training for clients in DFID's expectations from projects and the use of consultants would be very helpful.*
- *A better understanding of how project experience is regarded within the local HR system is essential for understanding the motivation of local staff to work on projects.*

## **3.2. PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION**

In any project, implementation is more difficult than design. Implementation requires great commitment and professionalism at every stage - including good planning, controlling the budget ; integrating different parts of the project ; coordinating human resources ; managing consultancy ; building local capacity, etc. Design deals with the larger picture and the overall direction. The devil is in the details.

### **3.2.1 Creation of a Common Vision**

At the start of GBEP, although there was a Logframe which had been agreed by all stakeholders, its specific meaning was quite differently interpreted by different parties at the beginning of the project. The purpose level statement was:

“To have more boys and girls entering and completing the primary and junior middle school cycles in Gansu, especially in the four target counties, and to reduce inequalities within the educational system”

This statement was a kind of vision for the project – but, it was too short and expressed in language that was too technical to really communicate a vision easily understood and widely shared. In addition, the design process was so short that there was insufficient time to build a consensus of what this meant. Thus, there was a vision, but it would be difficult to claim there was a shared vision at the beginning of the project.

Logframes are very useful reference and management tools, but they are also a shorthand for a very complex set of inputs, processes and outputs. To be effective they need to be interpreted in broadly the same way by all participants. In the case of GBEP that interpretation was formed over the first 18 months or so of the project life - but, it was not an easy process. It came about through continual debate and disagreement about the meaning of specific outputs, the activities intended to achieve them and the processes by which that should be done.

Through this process of discussion and disagreement, which mainly involved consultants and PMO staff at all levels but also drew in DFID and a wider range of

GPED staff, and through trying to agree the focus and priority of activities, agreement was gradually forged on what the vision of the project was.

Most importantly, the common vision was forged over time, through working together on common activities and agreeing on common principles that underlay the vision (see section 5 for more detail on the principles).

***Learning Points:***

- ***An important element of success lay in creating a common vision for what the project was to achieve. That vision had to be shared, or at least accepted by the majority, in order to be of use.***
- ***Communicating the vision requires expressing it in language that is more accessible to a wide range of stakeholders***

### **3.2.2 Good Planning**

*GBEP aimed to change every aspect of basic education. It created a culture that changed attitudes among many different people, such as teachers, headteachers and even civil works planners. Building a school is not only about creating a building but about putting children at the centre of the design. This never happened in other projects before.*

***Mr. Bai Tianyou. The deputy head of PPMO in GBEP and current head of PMO in GBEP II.***

As mentioned above, GBEP's design aimed to bring systematic interventions. And it was really through the annual planning process that those interventions were carried out in a coordinated way. What needed to be done, how much and at what time were very carefully considered and calculated by the PMO and consultant team every year. In the early stages, the consultant management team tended to lead the discussion but after 3 years the PMO led the discussion and the consultant management team provided comments and suggestions for revision.

During the discussion, every activity in each component was carefully reviewed according to its progress and practicality. This included looking critically at some activities and asking whether they were needed even if they were already in the plan and budget. Each year some activities were completely cut while others, not thought of during design, were added.

In total in GBEP, there were more than 100 activities, so this planning meeting would usually take at least 2 or 3 days. Before the planning meeting, the PMO also used participatory methods to involve key staff in the county PMO and prefecture PMO to help to draft the initial plan. Thus, people at different levels would have some ownership of the plan and the commitment to turn it into practice.

The annual plan and budget was submitted to DFID/GPED in October before the project annual review took place. It would then be revised after DFID/GPED reviewed the project to reflect any weakness or aspects DFID thought to need

improving. Before the end of the year, DFID/GPED would approve the annual plan and it would become an important guide during implementation the following next year.

This plan would also be periodically reviewed by DFID, the PMO and the consultant management team to update the progress of the work. The consultant management team would also make the consultancy input plan and timetable according to this plan.

***Learning Point:***

- ***Taking the annual planning process seriously and trying to involve people from different levels of the project so they would have ownership and commitment to implement the plan is important.***

### **3.2.3 Good Budgeting**

*Our evaluation identified major lessons from which policy-makers and practitioners could learn in other countries on ways to reduce the economic burden of education on poor households, and thus on ways to help achieve the goal of quality basic education for all."*

***Mark Bray, Director, UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP). Independent consultant to review GBEP efforts at reducing the cost of education.***

In tandem with the annual planning process was the annual budgeting process. During the meeting, the detailed budget was made according to the needs of each activity. During the discussion, the budget of each activity was thoroughly reviewed and questioned. In the case of hardware procurement, these questions were always more searching since it is much easier to spend a large amount of money in procurement in a short time, but for capacity building - where the money may be better used - much greater management effort is required but the spend may be less. For example, if we organise training for 100 teachers, the cost might be the same as procuring 30 to 40 sets of desks and chairs, but the effort and organisation needed for procurement may be much less.

The budget was attached to the annual plan and reviewed periodically. The draft budget would be submitted to DFID/GPED for approval. When the budget and annual plan were approved, PMO were able to follow this plan and budget and operate the project without further approval from DFID, except where large capital items such as civil works and large scale procurement were involved. DFID also contracted an independent financial consultant to review the procurement process and provide training to the PMO.

In the case of civil works and procurement of large capital items, a separate letter jointly signed by the PMO and consultant management team would be submitted to DFID for approval. This proved to be a very effective system — on the one hand the PMO had a certain flexibility to implement activities, on the other hand, DFID controlled and double-checked large scale items. This system also offered good protection to the PMO who may have experienced some pressure from senior officials

to spend project fund on activities not strictly relevant to the project – this often happened in other projects. Through these checks and balances, the PMO was in a very strong position to follow the project financial handbook.

GBEP kept a good balance of so-called ‘hardware’ and ‘software’. The fund for buildings/ furniture (‘hardware’) was about £3.6 million - about 25% of the total project fund of £14 million. 75% of the fund was used for improving access, teaching and learning, management, research and dissemination (‘software’). The balance of hardware and software seemed appropriate and people started to value the ‘software input’ of GBEP. Thus, when DFID decided to expand GBEP initiatives across Gansu province (SUBEP), both the Vice Governor of Gansu and the Director of Gansu PED insisted on putting all the funds to ‘software’.<sup>5</sup> This is a good example where good practice had a very positive impact on policy making (GRIPP).

**Learning Point:**

- ***How to best use the budget is a big challenge in all projects. GBEP carefully used the budget according to the project needs and kept a very good balance between ‘software’ and ‘hardware’ so that funds were effectively allocated to benefit the most important stakeholders - disadvantaged children in poor areas.***

### 3.2.4 Control of Implementation Quality

*The most important reason for GBEP’s success was its reliance on people. The people in PMO and GPED are open-minded and hard-working, the consultants are outstanding and highly-committed. There was good communication among DFID, PMO and the consultant team. All these elements of people involved led to the high quality of the implementation in GBEP.*

***Liu Yang, Project Manager of DFID China***

The annual workplan laid out what the implementers of the project should do, but did not define the details of how to do it. This was defined by the PMO staff and consultants responsible for different project outputs who would prepare a plan for implementation approved by the PMO and Consultant Management teams. ***One of the key factors in the success of GBEP lay in this detailed planning, control and monitoring of the quality of project initiatives.***

In China, many projects are implemented by issuing orders and instructions from the upper levels of government to the lower levels. These orders are rather general and often vague – their interpretation is left to the implementers. Hence, there is often wide variability in the outcomes of government initiatives at the local level which is attributable to the imprecise nature of the initial orders and poor monitoring.

GBEP helped to establish a mechanism for controlling the implementation process of any project activity. ***Every activity was analysed in detail prior to commencement of the activity and only when this had been done was the activity initiated. For***

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<sup>5</sup> Interview DFID project manager, Liu yang.

*example, before any training activities took place, the following questions would be clarified often through several rounds of discussion:*

- Why is the training needed?
- Are there any currently available training materials or do new materials need to be developed?
- Who will be the trainers?
- Where to organise the training (county or provincial level)?
- How many classes with how many trainees and trainers?
- How will the training quality be monitored and evaluated?

The Provincial PMO (PPMO) and the consultant team would work together closely on the timing and quality control of each step. These were also the steps followed to decide at which stage and how much consultancy inputs would be needed. ***The work of the PPMO and consultant team did not stop after issuing notices about what to do, but continued in work with the county staff on the process of how to implement these project activities.*** This ensured that the PPMO and the consultant team had timely information on the quality of every activity and also the support needs of the local people. This is also a good way to change the policy and the practice according to the current lessons learnt from the project activities, such as textbook recycling programme, free lunch pilot, solar energy experiment (See section 4 for details) .

***Learning Points:***

- ***Quality control is a key element in project implementation. It starts from planning but goes across the whole process of implementation. Good quality control needs high commitment and high professional skills.***
- ***Closely monitoring the quality provided good feedback which helped ‘getting research into policy and practice’ (GRIPP).***

### **3.2.5 Integration of the Activities between Different Outputs**

*Although GBEP is close to the end, its fruit will stay in the poor mountain areas for ever. As a female teacher, I will keep the project vision in mind and attract more girls into school, using participatory teaching in the classroom so children can enjoy learning in a happy atmosphere. I hope the seeds of GBEP can take root, bring forth buds, blossom out and produce fruit.*

***Kan Lanlan (the project beneficial )***

GBEP took a holistic view of reforming the education system. This was demonstrated by a series of well-thought out and well paced activities in a comprehensive approach. It was expected that the effects from all the activities would not be a simple ‘1+1=2’ but be a ‘1+1>2’.

For example, when the participatory teaching concept and methodology were introduced, it was not just up to the teacher training component to expand and consolidate the new teaching practice. Actually, before the teachers training component started to provide training to the teachers, the SDP component had already

introduced the participation concept to headteachers so they could provide support to teachers and encourage using participatory approach in schools.

Right after the teachers were trained with the participatory teaching, the headteachers were trained specifically on how to provide support to teachers in the introduction of child-centred teaching. Later, a teaching support system was established within the education administration system. The staff of the teaching research offices of the CEB were trained to provide regular on-site support to the teachers in classroom teaching with the new methods.

Following this, the inspection framework was developed using indicators about the changes in classroom teaching practice. Inspectors were trained to evaluate the effectiveness of the new teaching practices and help teachers to improve classroom teaching. Through these well-timed, systematic and reinforcing activities, the participatory teaching concept and practice was introduced and consolidated gradually and successfully.

This integration required a lot of coordination and very close working relationships between PMO staff and consultants. In some cases consultants and PMO staff made inputs to two, three or even four components at the same time – allowing them to share the information across components and find connections. One of the key roles of the consultant management team was to brief the consultants about what was happening in other parts of the project to make sure there was coordination and avoid duplication. [See TA management for details.]

***Learning Point:***

- ***This systematic intervention strategy could only be realised through the integration of the activities between different outputs. This integration had to be actively managed by PPMO and consultants.***

### **3.2.6 Project Monitoring and Evaluation**

*When people ask me what I do in Gansu I tell them that it is the first project I have worked in where change has been clearly visible in the schools and children. Most importantly, in the early years classrooms, we have also seen changes in the environment, in teacher attitudes and in children's learning achievement. This is due to the hard work of everyone in the project: the cooperative and intelligent support of the project government officials, the excellent management and smooth running of the team and the cooperation and enthusiastic response of trainers and teachers.*

***Dr Brigid Smith, Consultant for Early Years and Team Leader of Mid-Term Review***

One of the strengths of the GBEP implementation was the emphasis on a variety of both formal and informal monitoring mechanisms. A series of different arrangements ensured that the quality of implementation was continuously under review. In the last two years of the project life increasing emphasis was placed on using external evaluations to summarise project progress in specific areas and highlight sustainability issues. Some of the key monitoring and evaluation measures included:

***Annual Report of PMO:*** Every October, the PPMO would submit an annual project progress report to DFID/GPED. The process of writing this report was also a process of reviewing the project progress. In the first year, the PPMO's report was very simple and general. Gradually, a system was developed by the PPMO that required the county PMOs to write their own reports which were then summarised by the Prefecture PMO. The PPMO used this report as the basis for its own report.

Over a number of years these reports developed from being simple statements of facts (activity x implemented successfully) to reports of progress adducing evidence. They gradually changed from focusing only on the inputs to describing how the inputs were leading to achievement of the desired outputs.

***Annual review by DFID:*** The annual review organised by DFID played an important role in the overall review of project progress. Since the annual report from the PPMO already gave a clear picture of the project progress and evidence for it, DFID's visit would mainly check whether the report accurately reflected the situation, and would question whether the evidence produced was robust. On each occasion DFID would include in their team some independent national and international consultants, with different professional backgrounds, who would look with fresh eyes at the project and often provide valuable suggestions for planning by PPMO and consultants.

***Consultant Reports:*** Consultants were required to write reports to a standard template for every input. Briefing and debriefing meetings were held with the PMO to identify issues. An action matrix in each report identified the key actions that needed to be taken in the following weeks and months and identified those responsible. This matrix would usually be the focus of the briefing meeting on the next consultancy visit. All reports were sent to the PMOs at Prefecture and County levels in Chinese to keep project staff fully informed. ***This kind of systematic reporting assisted greatly in targeting interventions at the right time and in the right way to the right groups.***

***Baseline and End of Project Evaluation:*** GBEP was unique in being able to conduct a universal baseline survey and a universal end of project evaluation. The baseline gave valuable quantitative and qualitative information which was used to revise the project logframe and adjust the direction of the project (for example, the decision to give scholarships only to minority girls from the second year of the project was heavily influenced by the data collected from the baseline survey). Because the baseline was a universal sample (all schools, all teachers and headteachers were covered) the end of project evaluation (also a universal sample) was able to report with very high degrees of confidence on the changes that had taken place in the 6-year project life. There was no question of statistical bias, of incorrect sampling etc.

***Internal Review Workshops:*** At the same time, the PPMO and the consultant team organised review workshops for various major project activities, such as SDP, teacher training, inspection etc. These workshops were organised at critical stages in the project life to summarise lessons and provide guidance on the adjustment of the interventions.

***External Reviews:*** Besides the regular internal reviews, GBEP did use external reviewers for the main interventions at the middle or near the end of the programs.

These external reviews produced ‘third eye’ observations on project activities. Many useful lessons and recommendations from the external reviews helped the PPMO and the consultant team to adjust the project activities. There are six external reviews including: SDP, cost reduction, learning environment improvement, teacher training, management, free lunch piloting and all the reports were published or printed for disseminating GBEP lessons internally and externally.

**International Conferences:** GBEP organised two international conferences: one focused on SDP, the other one focused on teacher education, early years’ education and SEN. *Organising these conferences was very time consuming, but helped the project and brought in some new ideas from the experience of other projects and other countries.*

**Learning Point:**

- *GBEP had a very comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system which made sure the project implementation was going in the right direction but also allowed for the modification according to reality.*

### 3.2.7 Capacity Building

*I have learned a lot from GBEP and my leadership has improved greatly. I think, no matter what I do in the future, I will benefit from the advanced educational ideas and professional management methods of GBEP throughout my life. If every project could achieve what GBEP has, the education in rural minority areas would develop as rapidly as the growth of sesame flowers.*

**Dong Caiyun (Head teacher from Chuimatan Primary School, Jishishan County)**

One of the frequent comments on the project by the DFID project manager, by the director of the PMOs, by headteachers, by teachers and by officials was that local capacity improved substantially.

Only when long term capacity building is taken as a key aim, will there be the patience to invest in processes – and this is where the short, sharp shock approach of mass training in many projects fails to introduce sustainable change.

Capacity building takes time. However, it was not easy for local people to understand the ways to achieve it. Take materials development as an example. In the first month of the project, teacher training consultants mapped out a proposed timetable for creating new in-service teacher training courses, that envisaged a 9 month process from start to finish. The PMO teacher training counterparts responded by saying they thought it could be done in 3 months. They were right. It could be done in three months if one or two professors in NWNNU were given the responsibility to write the materials. But, the results would be a set of quite academically focused materials, that had involved few people in their making and would be quite divorced from the reality of the classroom teaching situation in these poor minority counties. There are plenty of such materials available in the market.



Instead, GBEP set up writing teams consisting of local teachers, local normal school teachers and university / normal school teachers - all guided by national and international consultants. These writers, in turn, trained the trainers who, in turn, trained the teachers. The same approach applied to training of headteachers, SDP training, inspection training, etc). By the end of project, each county had built up its capacity to use local trainers to deliver almost all training modules (14 modules in teacher training, 7 in headteacher training, 3 in SDP, etc). They did not need to rely on professors from universities. A large group of trainers was now qualified to do the job.

Capacity building also needs mentoring and repeated chances to try new methods and approaches. It cannot be done in a single shot of training. GBEP provided several kinds of learning opportunities for teachers, headteachers and officials to build capacity. There were overseas study visits for teacher training group members which provided the first exposure to new ideas in practice. On their return several training and writing workshops were held by consultants to build on the experience gained on the tour.

There were also some study visits to Shanghai, Guangdong, Yunnan, Beijing, Sichuan and Shanxi to study the national experience of female head teachers, social development support groups, special education needs etc. More important is that every team has a lot of involvement in project activities to improve their practice in reality, such as developing materials, being trainers, monitoring the project activities, writing reports, representing GBEP experiences in national or international conferences. During the process, consultants working closely and regularly with local teams were able to gradually mentor educators and increase their capacity in different professional areas.

#### ***Learning Points:***

- ***Only when long term capacity building is taken as a key aim, will there be the patience to invest in processes.***
- ***Capacity building also needs mentoring and repeated chances to try new methods and approaches.***

### **3.2.8 Creating a Culture of Innovation**

*GBEP was trailblazing in many ways and we all experienced challenges at every turn during the initial years. However, as piloting successes and replicable lessons began to show the benefits for education in Gansu, many of those involved in the project began to believe in the reforms. The pilots and innovations have now become regular practices.*

***Sue Milner, former Education Adviser to DFID China***

As a pilot project, innovation was a strong characteristic of the project. To every problem identified in the project, the PMO and consultants always asked: should we try a new method? Why did the former way not work? Is there any other possibility to make things improve?

It is understandable that at the start people hesitated to try new methods because there was the risk of failure. What GBEP achieved was to show what positive benefits innovation could bring to education practice, as well as emphasise that failure also offered good lessons, both to the project areas and for other places in China.

In short, GBEP created a culture where innovation created more openness to change ; a culture where people were willing to try new things and take the risk of failure.

As local officials, teachers' and headteachers' willingness to test new methods increased through this new culture, GBEP initiated many new pilots, most of which were successful. Belief is an important part of change and the fact that local people approached new pilots positively, rather than with a spirit of resistance, may have contributed to their chance of success.

One of the enemies of piloting is self-humiliation and lack of confidence. Local people were used to taking negative views of their undeveloped ("luo hou" in Chinese) education situation because they were far behind other areas in China. Though they were pushed to try new thing in the beginning of the project, later they found they had gone further ahead than many developed areas of China in trying education initiatives despite being from economic poor areas. This gave them great confidence.

For example, in the fourth year of the project, one group of SDP representatives from GBEP joined a conference in Shanghai where they intended to learn some good lessons from a well known "developed area". This they did, but, they also found that in several respects, they were more advanced in implementing SDP and using participatory methods in teaching than the educators from other places including Shanghai. This message was disseminated widely in project areas inspiring local people to continue their innovative practice.

It would be a long list if we recorded every pilot supported by the project. Take access issues as just one example. There are many different reasons why parents don't send children, especially girls, to school: lack of money, poor school buildings; schools without toilets for girls; few female teachers ; poor teaching quality ; irrelevant curriculum etc. The range of initiatives GBEP undertook to address this issue included:

- providing scholarships to poor students 70% of them distributed to minority girls
- piloting providing hot water to students for better hygiene and to counter the very dry conditions
- piloting free lunch in four schools leading to dramatic increases in retention
- allocating small funds to schools to build "happy campuses" to make a child-friendly environment, having a significant impact on the demand for schooling from children
- building schools with clean toilets, and female teachers' dormitories to make posting of female teachers more possible.
- posting female teachers to remote schools to encourage enrolment of girls especially minorities
- Providing in-service training to Daike teachers and a diploma course to female Daike teachers to increase the number of female teachers in remote schools

- Providing special teacher training programmes for female head teachers
- Providing training to female community members to encourage them to send their children to schools
- Developing a Social Development Handbook to raise awareness of gender and discrimination with pictures and simple sentence distributed to communities.
- Printing several posters encouraging parents to send children to school and put these up in schools and local communities

In isolation these pilots might have had a limited impact. Taken together their impact was significant.

***Learning Points:***

- ***Failures also offered good lessons In GBEP failure meant change not rejection.***
- ***One of the characteristics of GBEP piloting is that several piloting initiatives often supported each other – leading to a reinforced impact.***

### **3.2.9 Strong Consultancy Support**

*The reason that GBEP had a big impact nationwide, is that many innovative practices were carried out in the project which wouldn't have happened without consultants' involvement. Other projects, which have had limited impact, only followed or imitated former practice without relevance to local people or innovation due to lack of strong professional support.*

***Prof. Zhu Yimin, National Consultant of EMIS***

Education consultancy is a new occupation in China. It is even difficult to find a Chinese term for consultant. In projects, consultants are always referred to as 'experts'. To some extent, this is right because there are few full-time or freelance consultants in China, so most of national consultants are professors or researchers in universities.

The DFID model of consultancy support is quite different to that of other agencies working in China and of the MoE itself. Because DFID invests so heavily in the soft side of projects and seeks openly to foster change, they recognise that professional support is essential in the early stages of a project to stimulate the changes being initiated. Thus, a considerable proportion of the project funds (about 25%) were spent on consultancy support, the majority of this on national consultancy.

To a certain extent, the success of GBEP came from the sound integration of international experiences with the local needs. This relied heavily on the capabilities of the national consultants interpreting the best international practice under local circumstances. GBEP has produced a group of excellent national consultants which did not exist before in the education sector as, before GBEP started, consultancy service was quite a vague concept. Now, these consultants are active in many other projects and fields. They have not only expanded GBEP lessons and experiences but also helped to develop the consultancy service in this very conservative sector.

Although many national consultants got their initial consultancy experience in GBEP, they were very outstanding academics or talented young scholars in their professional areas before they became involved in GBEP. Most of them came from top universities like Peking University, Beijing Normal University and Tsinghua University (similar status as Cambridge University, Institute of Education, Oxford University). That did not mean their approach was very academic. On the contrary, they are academics who are interested in rural education and want to contribute to change the reality in poor areas. They all have fulltime professorships and plenty of invitations from many projects in big cities in China and overseas. Gansu would be the least interesting place for travelling or working for most of these experts if their interests were not really in professional and development issues. That is to say, there is a similarity among GBEP consultants – they are both highly professional and highly dedicated.

The importance of national consultants in GBEP cannot be overstressed. They built a bridge between international best practice and the local situation. They helped international consultants to understand which part of international experience could be used in project areas, while at the same time helping local people understand the value of the international and national experience.

It is sometimes mistakenly thought that national consultants work as interpreters for international consultants. In GBEP all national consultants were professionals in their own right. What interpreting they did was not of the words coming out of the mouths of international consultants but the concepts and ideas and knowledge of good practice in their heads. Using appropriate Chinese language, concepts and images they were able to explain help these international values, principles and practices to be adapted to local circumstances.

One of the consultants who worked in the Ministry of Education and the World Bank commented that:

“Before I joined GBEP, I thought a consultant’s role was thinking up some good ideas then giving these to the local people to implement. In fact, in GBEP, consultants needed to work very closely with local people to discuss and find solutions. Consultants don’t do by themselves, they support local people to do by themselves.”

What national consultants brought in the project is not only their knowledge in professional areas but also the new trend in national education reform. For example, the national consultant for teacher training was also in charge of teacher training for new national curriculum reform. The project benefited from the experience she brought from the national project and local teachers felt that they were working in line with national reforms - even starting to use participatory teaching methods earlier than some other areas.

It was this unique combination of international, national and local expertise which lay at the heart of much of the success of GBEP. National consultants were the pivotal factor, but most of them also learned a great deal from international consultants about good international practice and about professional approaches to practical project work. But no matter how effective this combination was, without keen and dedicated local counterparts (officials, headteachers, teachers etc.), GBEP could not have been

successful. All three parties working in concert were able to make effective contributions that resulted in successful project initiatives.

Managing the professional aspect of the consultancy was a big task. Many GBEP consultants commented on the support they got from the management team. One international consultant said:

‘GBEP was tightly managed, but not over-managed. You felt the presence of the leadership even when it was physically out of town. Even so you felt trusted and your professionalism respected, but you had to earn that respect. It was never taken for granted. Consultant advice was sought and seemingly valued, creating a culture of mutual respect and project ownership. Significant, too, was the expectation that consultants would have knowledge of the overall project, not just their own component. They needed to understand, and be able to articulate ideas and strategies for progressing the GBEP as a whole.’

***Learning Points:***

- ***The unique combination of international, national and local expertise was a crucial element of the success of GBEP.***
- ***Strong support and management of consultants controlled the quality of consultancy.***

### **3.2.10 Overall Cost Effectiveness**

*GBEP, which is funded by the British government, used very little money in hardware and equipment and all procurement was considered to be for the benefit of children, not for showing off. Most of the funds went to teacher training. This project could provide an idea to our government on education investment. The money is not the most difficult element for local government. However, if there was 1 million Yuan available, how many officials would like to put it in education, to the poorest schools ?*

***National representatives’ speech in National Congress, 2006<sup>6</sup>***

An independent review of GBEP tried to establish whether the interventions were cost effective. The conclusions were very positive though some of the data was difficult to interpret. The difficulty in such an integrated project is identifying the specific impact of a particular investment on a particular output (e.g. an investment to train a teacher on the learning achievement of a child when separate inputs such as improved school management and more reference books may also directly impact).

Some people argue that a lot of investment was put in a small area, but, the achievements were also significant including the influence on other projects. Many of the greatest long term outputs of the project may be either immeasurable (e.g. the

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<sup>6</sup> <http://news.sohu.com/20060309/n242216023.shtml>

influence on quality improvement in another province of using GBEP training materials) or may impact far in the future (a girl who graduates from primary school with a GBEP scholarship who goes on to raise herself and her family out of poverty).

As Adrian Davis, the head of DFID China, said when he was interviewed by Dialogue on CCTV 9:

“By and large we think the project has been extremely successful. We built on our work in Gansu successfully - so after that, the work being done in Gansu was taken by us into a project with the World Bank which covers five provinces in the western area. This is a bigger project, which covers 112 counties—Gansu only covers 4 counties. We are now working on the national stage with MoE in a further 4 provinces.

So Gansu is being incredibly successful and we certainly consider this money well spent. The issue is, it is a pilot project. We have spent around £15m (about ¥170m RMB) providing basic education in 4 counties. That is not sustainable itself and it is not replicable because it is too much money for each county. But the ideas in it have been proven, and they can be rolled up for much less money, and that is the real test of whether the project is or is not successful. We certainly do believe it is.”

***Learning Point:***

- ***If we consider all the tangible and intangible achievements of GBEP and its impact in other areas of China, GBEP can be counted as a cost effective pilot project.***

### **3.3. PROJECT MANAGEMENT**

Successful project management in GBEP was in large measure due to a strong project management structure; a flexible and supportive approach by DFID China; a good working relationship between PMOs and consultants; and solid TA management.

#### **3.3.1 Project Management Structure**

The implementation of the project was under the leadership of the Project Management Office (PMO) set up for this purpose by the GPED and drawing on staff from different divisions within the GPED. On average about 6/7 staff (most of them part-time) were involved.

At the prefecture and county levels were PMOs with an average of 5 staff (most of them part-time) working on the project. All four counties were in the same prefecture and geographically close to each other though they differed in economic and social conditions.

Alongside the GPED was the team of education consultants managed by Cambridge Education. This consisted of a management team of 3 (one international, two national)

a core team of about 20 international and national consultants making an average of three inputs each per year, and a further 20 consultants (mainly national) who made occasional or very specific inputs.

This structure worked well, though in the first few years of the project it was felt that there was insufficient support at the provincial level for a project of this size. But a very positive feature was the way in which staff from different divisions were involved. This brought knowledge and expertise from those divisions and in turn had an impact on the other staff working in those divisions.

***Learning Points:***

- ***Staffing the PMO from different divisions / sections of the county and prefecture education bureau worked very well in the four counties in GBEP because it helped to integrate the project work with their daily work.***
- ***This kind of staffing is much harder to achieve at provincial level. But, if it is possible the impact is greater in influencing policy and getting research into practice.***

### **3.3.2 The Role of PPMO**

*What made the GBEP different though, and in my view highly successful, was the creation of an environment of genuine trust and partnership amongst everyone working on the project, the Cambridge Education project management team, their Chinese counterparts at central and local levels, and the consultant teams, international and Chinese.*

*Mike Williams, international consultant of inspection*

In GBEP, the PMO and consultant team developed a good and trusting partnership. They supported each other and served as a challenging function to each other.

However, at the beginning of the project there were many difficulties associated with the roles of the consultants and the GPED. The Gansu PED had no experience of working with consultants and could not see why they were needed. They felt they simply needed the money. It took at least six months before they understood that in the process of change an external third party is an often essential key to breaking with the past and doing things in a different way.

In fact, the first PPMO executive director failed to handle the changes with the project management successfully and experienced great difficulties in managing the project implementation activities. With the intervention of more senior officials, a new official in PED was appointed as the replacement and the successor took a more open-minded approach to piloting. This was a turning point in the project. From then on, the mutual support between PMO and consultant team was enhanced and the project was implemented smoothly.

It is also true to say that, especially at the provincial level, many did not see any benefit to being involved in the project. In the early years this caused a high level of turnover of staff and an under-capacity within the PMOs. This was partly the result of a lack of experience of projects with high levels of consultancy support and partly a

reflection of the institutional changes that happened in the first two years of the project such that the GPED's staffing was cut by 50%.

The result was a mismatch between the PMO structure and the consultancy structure: a staff of two full time PMO management staff and 2 part-time professional staff acted as counterparts to a team of almost 25 regular consultants. Consequently, several PMO staff had to cover several professional areas (e.g. Civil works, SDP and Teacher training all fell under one person's remit), whereas the consultancy team was divided by discipline. In such circumstances building up the PMOs capacity to take over the work of consultants was a task that was always an uphill struggle.

Nonetheless, despite these structural difficulties, the commitment of the PPMO staff and the PMO staff at Prefecture and County levels was rarely in doubt and was crucial to GBEP success. This commitment partly came naturally because of the type of individuals involved and partly came from the ownership created by GBEP through the participatory approach – to management as much as professional work.

***Learning Point:***

- ***Ideally, projects should be fully integrated into GPED structures, not set up separately. But, there are systematic problems in managing projects in this way since they are always short-term and with specific purposes which may not align exactly with departmental purposes. Unless there is very strong support from senior officials, such as the head of PED, it is unlikely to happen.***

### **3.3.3 Leadership by the DFID Team**

*The relationship between us and Cambridge Education is like a partner or close friend. DFID is our leader but we always reached mutual understanding to implement project activities. One of the best things DFID did was to bring the best practices worldwide to China through international and national consultants. This mechanism is very successful.*

***Ms. Ba Jiankun, the head of PPMO in GBEP***

One of the most noticeable characteristics of GBEP was the high degree of autonomy given by the DFID Beijing Office to the PPMO and the consultant team over the details of project implementation.

DFID would approve the annual work plan and budget presented by the PPMO and the consultants. However, the DFID review team would not stick simply to the plans and budget to evaluate project progress. Instead, they would focus on the progress using the indicators from the project logframe. This allowed the PPMO and the consultant team to take a flexible and practical attitude towards the implementation of the project activities. Even the project logframe was revised three times to match the changes with the implementation progress and achievements.



The PPMO and the consultant team enjoyed considerable autonomy to decide the details of project implementation as soon as the work plan and budget were approved by DFID. This allowed the PPMO and the consultant team to make timely adjustment in response to the real needs. This was quite vital for a project like GBEP with piloting new initiatives at its core.

The DFID relationship with the PED at higher levels also proved to be a helpful tool for project progress. Difficult issues were often raised by senior DFID staff and pressure applied to solve ongoing problems. The frequent visits by DFID officials meant that these issues could not be ignored by GPED officials. This definitely had a positive impact in the early stage of the project to initiate piloting.

***Learning Points:***

- ***GBEP's success relied heavily on DFID's flexible approach and DFID's trust in consultants and PMOs, which reduced transaction time in adjusting implementation according to practice.***
- ***DFID formed very good relations with the provincial government and GPED which brought forth significant support from senior officials, as well as allowing the project to influence those officials and their policy making.***

### **3.3.4 Consultancy Management**

Cambridge Education was contracted by DFID to provide technical support services through a public bidding process. All the consultants were part-time including the management team. The main tasks of the management team were:

- To support PMO in the project management, such as making annual plans and budgets and monitoring the progress of project activities.
- To manage the consultancy inputs in a range of professional areas

Therefore, the consultants were playing both a professional role – supporting activities in various components – and a management role, supporting the PPMO but also representing DFID's interests. While this was not a conflict of interest it required some careful diplomacy.

Over time the consultancy support was first varied in favour of national consultant support and then reduced overall. In the final year of the project most project activities were managed only by the PMO staff with light monitoring from the consultant management team.

By the end of the project the PPMO was fully able to manage the project without consultancy support *for management*. They still required a mixture of local and national support for technical activities (such as EMIS, SDP etc.). Management of consultants, however, was still a little weak at the end of the project since this task had been fully delegated to Cambridge Education.

Although repeated attempts were made from the MTR onwards to change the emphasis of the PPMO as receivers of consultancy support to managers of it, the

pressure of work and the complexity of the tasks meant that this met with limited success. For example, only once did a member of the PPMO staff find the time to write the TOR for a consultancy visit. Comments on TOR were almost never given. This is not surprising, and, given the relative inexperience of most of the PPMO staff, their huge workloads, and the strong partnership with Cambridge Education, it would have been unrealistic to expect much more.

***Learning Points:***

- *If we want PMOs to manage consultancy, it takes time for them to learn how to do this. A transition period is needed for PMOs and clear targets should be set at an early stage of the project.*
- *There is obvious challenge for PMOs since managing consultancy was not a requirement before the project and is unlikely to be one after the project (in their daily work), thus, is very difficult to motivate PMOs to see this very comprehensive and challenging work as an important task for them.*

#### **4. LESSONS LEARNT FROM UNSUCCESSFUL ACTIVITIES**

As mentioned above, GBEP has created a culture of innovation and freedom from the pressure of guaranteeing success. Many lessons are learnt from the successful experience, but also from the failures. The lessons from these unsuccessful aspects should also be shared with other donors and international organisations. On the other hand, the project had many choices and decisions which taken now with the fullness of hindsight might not be the same. That does not imply failure — just the luxury of experience and knowledge of how the environment has changed.

##### **4.1 Textbook Revolving Fund**

GBEP tried to pilot a textbook revolving program to extend the life of textbooks and reduce the burden on poor families. In less than two years the program was terminated. The main reasons were that at about the same time the national government began to substantially expand its programme of providing free textbooks to the poorest students. In addition, publishers change the textbooks every year so that the poor risk stigma for using out-of-date books. An additional worry specific to the area included strongly religious Muslim parents worrying that their children would be using textbooks used by Han children.<sup>7</sup>

***Learning Point:***

- *Government policy changes can overtake pilot experiments and a flexible approach allows termination of an outdated idea.*

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Bray, Ding Xiaohao and Huang Ping, Reducing the Burden on the Poor: Household Costs of Basic Education in Gansu, China. The University of Hong Kong, 2004.

## 4.2 Solar Energy Experiment

GBEP piloted a school building in one school in Kangle county with passively heated solar classrooms (all south facing walls glassed to absorb as much sunshine as possible) for saving the cost of coal and being environment friendly. At the same time, the wall was doubled in thickness with improved insulation to reduce heat loss. An evaluation study showed that the temperature in these classrooms was about 2 degrees Celsius higher than other classrooms heated by coal stoves. However, the average building cost of the pilot classroom was 25% higher than other ordinary classrooms. The maintenance cost was also very high. The pilot was not expanded because of the financial consideration and maintenance difficulties.

### *Learning Point:*

- *Short term local budgetary considerations cannot easily be overcome by long term financial benefits without higher level government intervention.*

## 4.3 Free Lunch Program

GBEP decided to pilot a free lunch programme for all the students in four very poor schools (two teaching points and two village schools picked because of their very low enrolment rates) to test whether this would have an impact on enrolment rates. These schools were selected according to the criteria developed by the SDSG. The cost of the free lunch for every child was RMB1 Yuan (US\$0.125) per day and approximately RMB200 (US\$25) per school calendar year.

The evaluation of the pilot found that the student numbers in the pilot schools increased quite significantly and it was ‘especially obvious that female students’ enrolment rate rose remarkably.’ Further more, ‘retention rates of the four schools were also high, all above 90%, with some even at 100%. These provide strong evidence that the free lunch program had a significant effect on attracting students to come to school.’<sup>8</sup> Despite these positive findings the pilot was not expanded or extended because of concerns about the potentially high cost of replicating it and lack of support from officials.

### *Learning Point:*

- *The Free lunch pilot appeared to show a very strong impact on enrolment. But, political and financial sustainability objections need considerable time (sometimes several years) to overcome.*

## 4.4 Reform of Education Finance: Two Commitments and Money Directly Distributed to Schools

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<sup>8</sup> An Independent Review on School Feeding Program, By Du Yuhong and Ma Guansheng, 2006.

The experiment with the Two Commitments proved very difficult, though in time may be counted successful if the counties all stick to promises to keep the two commitments going at 2005 levels. Disproportionate management effort was needed on this activity probably because the focus was exclusively on the county level.

GBEP also tried to build a new mechanism to distribute the non-personnel funds to schools in a more transparent and equitable way. A formula was developed to calculate how much to give each school. This formula gave higher weight to those remote schools in such a way that one student in a teaching point would have same amount of non-personnel budget for four students a county town school. The CEB were supposed to allocate the non-personnel budget from the “Two Commitments” and part of the project funds according to the calculation results from the formula.

However, it was very difficult to monitor the flow of the funds as there was no reliable accounting system from the township centre schools to the remote village schools and teaching points. Only the township centre schools were legally allowed to open bank accounts. So, as soon as the funds arrived at the account of the centre township schools, all onward distribution happened in cash. It was important to ensure that the township centre schools would really distribute all money to the attached village schools and teaching points, but this was very difficult to monitor.

On top of this it was stipulated that at least 50% of the funds allocated to schools should be used in the classroom (for teaching materials, student reference books, games etc.), but again it was difficult for the project to monitor the effectiveness of this since all the payment were in cash and there always lack formal receipt to provide evidence.

#### ***Learning Points:***

- ***Reforming county level financing in very poor counties significantly dependent on transfer from upper levels cannot be done by a focus on the county level alone. An element of the reform would have needed to address the provincial level – a task too great for this project.***
- ***Finance reform at county / school level also needs to be integrated into the ordinary education finance system and needs to be related to school finance practice. It is difficult to do this if the external policy climate is not favourable.***

#### **4.5 Female Daike Teachers Class**

To increase the number of female teachers in remote schools, and following the recommendation in MTR report, a kind of special training program was organised for female daike (non-government) teachers to upgrade their qualifications and then send them back to the villages they came from, as agreed by Prefecture PMO and teachers..

120 were selected to attend the special program organised at a provincial normal school in Lanzhou. They graduated after two years study. However, the prefecture policy changed and anyone who wanted to be a teacher should pass the unified exam. So the job guarantee disappeared.

The PPMO and the consultants did everything possible to coordinate the job assignment for the female teachers with the support from the DFID. However, at the end of the project there was still no final settlement.

***Learning Point:***

- ***Giving the project's high priority on helping disadvantaged groups, it was a failure that these female teachers were not treated as promised. The main reason is the resistance of key local institutions and the lack of stronger action from the GPED and DFID to ensure commitments were met.***

#### **4.6 Teacher Training Credit Scheme**

In the early stages of the project a formula was introduced to allocate in-service training opportunities to teachers. This formula was weighted in favour of remote schools. The thinking behind the scheme was to create a sustainable model whereby training opportunities post-project could be allocated easily, especially as it was intended this would be linked to the funding for schools being channelled through the SDP process.

However, the system relied on a robust database of teachers and a sound record of the opportunities they had taken up. This proved to be much harder to establish than first expected. Database skills at county and prefecture levels were lacking and there was no system to graft on to – opportunities were allocated according to personal preference. By the end of the third year of the project it was evident that the system was not being used.

***Learning Point:***

- ***The credit scheme would have been better to be fully integrated into government's new system of teachers' continuing education, then the credits could be counted in the formal system and motivate teachers to join the training.***

#### **4.7 Training of County Governors**

One area where GBEP failed to impact as strongly as it should have, was the involvement and support of the county governors. A great deal of attention was paid to trying to involve and influence the county education bureau heads so they were very active in the project and use participatory approach in their day job more frequently. But county governors only appeared in annual review or VIP's visits without more deep involvement.

***Learning Point:***

- ***Although GBEP can't achieve everything and target every person, but if more training to county governors had been organised, the impact would be not only limited in education sector itself and would have aided the work of the county education bureaus.***

#### **4.8 Initiating SEN and EYE Activities Earlier**

GBEP did not initiate or plan to start SEN and EYE activities until the Mid-Term Review (MTR). The MTR noticed that Grade 1 and 2 teachers were working under difficult circumstances (such as very large class sizes and poor teaching conditions) and they needed further training ‘with special early years participatory teaching strategies’. At same time, teachers needed much more specific training in handling the special education needs of different children, especially those with disabilities. The MTR report made very specific recommendations on launching the SEN and EYE as the team believed that these interventions would be quite helpful for consolidating the achievements of GBEP up to that time.

In response to the recommendations, GBEP organised the development of two modules for training teachers with the special skills: SEN and EYE. The SEN module was also used for the HT training.

Due to limited time after MTR, the implementation of the SEN and EYE programmes had to be done at a much quicker pace than other GBEP initiatives. This meant using a much smaller pilot scale and again restricted the possibilities to build up more practical experiences at the grass roots level. Since most of the SEN and EYE training had to be finished in a short period of time, the big training quantity made the quality control and monitoring also more difficult. As a result of the quick intervention at much shorter period, the consolidation of the initiatives was negatively influenced. Even though most of the teachers and HTs had developed some sense in the areas, the SEN and EYE concepts and practice had not been as widely and thoroughly embedded in classroom teaching as expected.

##### ***Learning Point:***

- ***If the SEN and EYE elements had been considered and built into teachers’ and HT training comprehensively from the very beginning, the impact may have been greater, sooner.***

#### **4.9 Training Female Community Members Earlier**

One of the key reasons for the introduction of SDP was to provide access for the participation of local community members in school management. It was believed that the capacity of the headteacher to mobilise local people played a vital in of ensuring the full and effective participation of the community.

However, some groups, especially the most disadvantaged groups such as women, still experienced difficulties in active participation. To promote the participation of women in SDP, it was specifically provisioned that there should be at least two female representatives in the SDP committee. Actually, the poor capacity of the women contributed to the unsatisfactory participation level. GBEP did not undertake specific training of female community members until very late in the project life. This intervention proved to be very effective but came too late.

##### ***Learning Point:***

- *If such capacity building activities of community members had started earlier, the participation level and quality of SDP might have been even better.*

#### **4.10 Teacher Education Reform**

Changing the way of the training and education of teachers in Gansu was essential for the fundamental and sustainable reform of school classroom teaching. This was a common understanding developed at very early stage of GBEP design and implementation. GBEP used different approaches to work in this area including involving teachers from teacher education institutions in materials development; setting up an M.Ed program majoring in primary education for 50 teachers from these institutions, etc.

The teacher education institutions experienced quite a lot of change from the active involvement of GBEP. The survey of the normal school teachers in Gansu also indicated somewhat positive effects of the project training to Normal school teachers on the issues of student centred approaches and social development.

All of these changes have been quite encouraging and some are definitely fundamental. *However, the changes could be even more systematic and thorough if the GBEP had done more to upgrade the syllabus of the teacher education institutions. Even though the teacher education institutions were involved in organizing various training events organised by GBEP, but the project could do better in trying to help the institutions to reform the way of training future teachers in a systematic way with the implementation of the new national curriculum.*

For example, a special program could have been organised for the purpose with a team focused on reviewing and changing the structure and contents of the syllabus of the teacher training institutions; more training could have been arranged on changing the ideology of the presidents of the teacher training institutions; more specifically designed training could have been organised for the teachers of the institutions, etc. The biggest loss in this part was that the Teachers Training Division of GPED was not very active in this area due to their commitment to other projects.

#### ***Learning Point:***

- *If the teacher training division were as much as involved the inspection office of GPED were in promoting the new inspection, the change and upgrading of teacher training institutions from an institutional point view could have been more profound and significant.*

#### **4.11 Research Program: Giving Young Scholars a chance**

The research program of GBEP was supposed to do a series of research with topics related to the project activities. The research would provide practical guidance to the project implementation and would also have policy implications for the reform and development of the education system in Gansu. As in other components, GBEP was

determined to do the research program with the introduction of innovation both in the selection of the research topics and the way to organise it.

An advertisement was issued in the public media inviting applications from the potential researchers national wide. It was planned to build up a pool of national researchers and then let them provide guidance to the local researchers. The pool was established but it turned out to be very time consuming process as there were so many CVs and very few of them would be appropriate to do the practical researches requested by the project. Most of the researchers in China at that time were very academic and not many had practical experiences in doing field work. The research program went painfully slowly.

A few of topics were selected which were directly linked with the project activities, such as action research on girls education in the project counties. Then, competitive bidding mechanism was introduced in selecting the researchers. Special preference was given to those young scholars who usually had limited chances getting the opportunities and funds in winning research programs. But they were much more open and quick in learning new research methodologies.

GBEP introduced action research methods and trained the local researchers on using it. The research process was carefully monitored and supported by the consultants with training and guidance. Gradually, more and more local researchers built up their capacity in doing action researches according to local needs. This helped to change the research style from mainly theoretical interest oriented to be more practice intervention oriented.

From the very beginning, GBEP was very clear to help building up the local research capacity with the growth of local researchers. After the mid term review, a new strategy called Young Scholars Scheme was designed. It aimed to improve the capacity of the local young researchers. Some research advisors were selected through restricted bidding to give specific support to each research topic. Consultants, including research consultants and social development consultants gave constant support to research teams. This approach was successful since all the young scholars involved thought they learned a lot and they valued the opportunities which they rarely got from other channels. Some young scholars said they felt like finishing a doctoral dissertation when they finished their research reports. If the focus had been given to young scholars at the very beginning, the whole process may have been easier.

***Learning Points:***

- ***Education researchers experienced in practical research are limited in China***
- ***Senior scholars often have workloads that are far too great, leading to reduced quality of outputs. For the sake of sustainability, young scholars are an appropriate target group for investment. This should be considered at the very beginning of the project.***



#### **4.12 Consultancy Capacity Building**

One of the most difficult things for TA management in GBEP was finding the right and qualified national consultants. Best scholars or researchers did not necessarily become the best consultants. As a consultant, practical experiences and adaptive capacities were much more important than academic background.

GBEP did not have specific plan for the development of consultancy capacity in China even though this was the first education project with so many consultancy inputs. International consultants provided some training and help mainly from acting as models or mentors, but there was no systematic training of the national consultants.

##### ***Learning Point:***

- ***Ideally, if a training program were developed and carried out to cover a much bigger pool of potential national consultants before GBEP was launched, the growth of education consultancy capacity and the support to the project – and to the whole education system - would be even stronger.***

### **5. CREATING THE ENVIRONMENT FOR SUSTAINED CHANGES**

The forgoing sections summarise the lessons learnt from the stages of the project cycle and from unsuccessful activities.

Underpinning all the successful activities was an environment created as the project grew which stimulated, encouraged and supported change. This environment could not have been achieved without a reasonably consistent and common understanding – a vision - of the purpose of the project and principles which should inform project activities.

There is little that is new in stating this. At the heart of all successful projects will be a shared vision, common principles and good leadership to communicate these. But, projects can easily lose sight of their larger aims by concentrating only on the implementation of activities.

In understanding and reviewing the reasons for the successes of GBEP it is important then to focus on the shared vision and common principles and how these were achieved. In such a comprehensive project it would have been easy for the project managers to become overwhelmed by the detail of project activities. Why did this not happen?

#### **5.1. Vision**

The vision of the project was the summary of what was hoped to be achieved. In technical terms this was the purpose level statement of the logframe. In lay terms to increase access for poor children and make the education system fairer for all.

In practical terms this actually translated into the adherence to a number of **principles**. These principles of the project were established through agreed approaches to activities, to who should participate in those activities and what should be the outcomes of the activities.

Broadly speaking those principles can be defined as: *participation, equity and attention to process*.

## 5.2 Three Principles

What GBEP did in making these three principles central to the practical application of the project's aims was to provide a framework within which education change and the reasons for it could be understood and justified within the arena of rural basic education.

It's not surprising therefore, that it took at least 18 months to 2 years before it could be said that a majority of project participants understood and accepted these principles. And the main reason it took so long is that ***principles like these cannot be disseminated – they have to be demonstrated***.

### 5.2.1 Participation

*The community members were saying that it was the first time they were consulted about school development issues. They began to participate more positively instead of with a passive attitude. The Community members realised that they are the owners of the school and their contribution would attract more children coming to schools.*

***Northwest Normal University team of Case Study during the Mid-term Review***

In designing the project one of the key weaknesses identified by all parties was a lack of participation in the education system. Schools were often described as if they were spaceships sent by the government with no connection to the community except as a place where children went. Decision-making was described as being entirely top-down. Headteachers felt they were caretakers not managers of schools.

Thus, the key and underlying theme of almost all project activity from the very start was participation. This started from parents and children being involved in school development planning and extended to officials and county governors taking part in training and discussions about how best to change the education system. Special emphasis was put on the participation of women and girls and of ethnic minority groups.

However, there is a perennial problem of using participation to engender change since many of the people participating have a vested interest in the status quo. In particular, local officials and those whom the system advantages see change as a threat to their positions fearing even that they may lose their jobs.

GBEP addressed this by training these local officials and using them as facilitators for the training of others. By doing so the project effectively made them responsible for the success or failure of change. Consequently, whether project initiatives then succeeded or failed often bore a close connection with the degree of support from these officials and the degree to which they saw it as beneficial to them or to the communities they served (especially their superiors).

Some examples of how this worked in practice included:

- All training was required to have a gender balance of participants.
- Teacher training writing teams were made up of ordinary teachers from rural schools, education officials and university professors.
- The SDP training materials emphasised community participation in making school plans as the core of the new approach.
- Social Development Support Groups (SDSG) set up in each county had representation from several officials within the county education bureau.
- Decision making on annual planning was extended to a wide group of people where previously it would have been confined to a handful

The impact of this emphasis on participation has been far reaching. In the classroom teachers have been transforming their relationships with pupils and their own understanding of teaching through the use of participatory teaching pedagogies; officials have been changing the way in which they hold meetings and make decisions and finding that participation makes for better policy making and parents and children have been forming new and closer bonds with the schools serving them through their participation in the planning process.

#### ***Learning Point:***

- ***By defining participation widely and putting it at the heart of the way in which the project activities were approached it became a defining characteristic of the project. The project was therefore not only promoting the virtues of participation but showing it in the way it approached all activities.***

#### **5.2.2 Equity**

*The girls in our village used to help their parents on the farm. They couldn't go to school and envied those pupils at school. Since the start of GBEP, they can go to school and study with the boys together.*

***Ma Jinhua's letter to Tony Blair after meeting him in July 2003***

Equity also underpinned all of the activities the project supported. The conception of equity the project supported lay at the heart of the innovation being introduced in

Gansu and was, and probably still is, the most controversial aspect. In this area, as in many rural areas of China, the commonly accepted definition of equity would be characterised as a horizontal one – namely the equal treatment of unequal groups.

For example : if there are 10 scholarships available to poor children in a remote school, the local conception of equity would suggest that roughly five boys and five girls should benefit.

It was in this environment that the project tried to introduce a vertical conception of equity. Vertical equity is the unequal treatment of unequal groups. Using the specific example above, vertical equity would suggest that either all, or the vast majority, of the 10 scholarships should go to girls. The argument would be that, while boys were also disadvantaged, girls suffer from a historical legacy of disadvantage and discrimination (an unequal group) that justifies a disproportionate weighting towards them (unequal treatment). There is abundant statistical and qualitative data to show this. Moreover, this is a worldwide phenomenon, not only a rural Chinese one.

This was a radical approach and one that caused much debate and disagreement. At first local administrators and educators were reluctant to accept this principle because it challenged the way in which resources were traditionally distributed. And the way resources were traditionally distributed was based on a cultural understanding of equity which was rooted in the welfare of the common good, of the group above all else – especially above the individual.

Hence the principle observed was: if there are limited resources, give something to everyone. The project's conception of equity is rooted in an understanding of equity as it relates to individual choice and opportunity. It is based on the understanding that to achieve equity in deeply inequitable circumstances requires righting historical disadvantages, it requires breaking the traditional pattern. Therefore, some groups and some individuals need to be prioritised.

Over time, and with the gradual increase in regular evidence from SDP, from EMIS, from independent reviews etc. the resistance to prioritising support to the most disadvantaged even in situations where poverty is relative, weakened and changed to support.

#### ***Learning Points:***

- ***Prioritising disadvantaged groups in areas where poverty is relative requires constant discussion and sometimes external support.***
- ***Cultural conceptions of equity need to be understood and respected while debate is engaged***
- ***Robust data is essential in convincing some about the need to prioritise.***

#### **5.2.3 Process**

*When I reviewed the last six years' experience in school development planning, there was a mixture of sour, sweet, bitter and spicy. I felt deeply that the process was more important than the result. The process of these six years is the development of*

*ourselves, as well as schools.*

***Wang Guocai, the SDP coordinator in Jishishan County***

One of the mantras of the project in the first few years became “the process is as important as the results”. That processes were as important (not more important) than results became an important principle and was frequently referred to. Why?

From the very start GBEP set out to experiment – it was a pilot project and that is why basing its efforts on only four very poor counties was seen as justified. The piloting of many different initiatives in teacher training; access; financial reform; education management etc. was not just about the results but about the way in which those results were arrived at.

What did this mean? It meant that the project created an environment for experimentation; an environment where it was accepted that things could fail or where there could be flexibility of things did not seem to be working. It created an environment where decisions were taken to do things a longer way because it would improve capacity rather than a short way which would achieve quicker results that would not be as long lasting.

Of course, process is intimately linked to participation since this is one of the key processes in any kind of change – wider involvement in the process of change may initially slow down the speed of change, but in the long run it creates change whose roots are deeper and more substantial than change dictated by orders.

Some other examples of how this has worked in practice include:

- Materials development teams in teacher training, inspection, headteacher training, SEN etc. were all required to act as master trainers and thereby find out how their materials are actually received.
- The development of new approaches e.g. the textbook revolving fund programme (which tried to reduce the costs of textbooks to poor students) and the school feeding programme (which tried to raise enrolment through providing a nutritious lunch) was done on a pilot basis with regular monitoring reports and independent reviews.
- Annual reviews of the project were done on a systematic basis with data collected to provide evidence for change. This was strengthened through the establishment of a student based EMIS. Failures as well as successes were pinpointed and wide discussion of the draft reviews was undertaken before report writing was completed.

***Learning Points:***

- ***The processes were as important as the results.***
- ***Wider involvement in the process of change may initially slow down the speed of change, but in the long run it creates change whose roots are deeper and more substantial than change dictated by orders.***

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

GBEP's greatest successes lay in the improvement and development of the human resources in the local education system. The same officials, same headteachers and same teachers are there today, but they see and do things differently now. With the right factors and conditions available, this success is replicable.

It is time consuming to change people's ideologies and attitudes in the education sector, but this is also where the most rewarding and sustainable achievements are to be found. People who embrace change rarely turn back and thus, to some extent, sustainability is guaranteed.

GBEP's experiences and lessons show that software improvements in the education system decide the success and sustainability of any education initiatives aimed at improving education services in poor rural areas.

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