Effective Joint Sector Reviews as (Mutual) Accountability Platforms:

Key Takeaways for Policymakers and Practitioners

A summary of Global Partnership for Education's study into education JSRs, highlighting key takeaways for education sector policymakers and practitioners in the aid environment. The full paper is available at: http://www.globalpartnership.org/content/effective-joint-sector-reviews-mutual-accountability-platforms

Introduction

Joint sector reviews (JSRs) are commonly used in the aid environment, particularly within the health and education sectors, to bring a variety of stakeholders to the table to monitor and evaluate sector progress. GPE's study contends that JSRs, when effective, can serve as a valuable tool for responsive sector planning, and may also act as platforms for building and supporting *mutual accountability*. JSRs are typically organized once or twice a year by the government, and offer an inclusive forum to assess progress toward agreed-upon objectives. A variety of sources of evidence are used to frame the discussions—primarily presented via an annual implementation report. The JSR process culminates in the organization of an inclusive forum for dialogue and the production of a review report (the JSR report/*aide memoire*) that is shared with all stakeholders and the wider public, and which contains actionable recommendations for correcting the course of action across programs within the sector.

Arguably little is known about *how* JSRs contribute to sector results or reinforce aid effectiveness principles. As such, this study set out to explore their role in supporting and developing *mutual accountability* within the education sector. The study is, to the authors' knowledge, the first comprehensive review of JSRs in education published to date. Its contribution is unique in its scope in that it gives voice to a variety of stakeholders across multiple countries and includes a systematic variable-based review of JSRs in 39 countries or states. Particular emphasis was placed on investigating whether the international development rhetoric around mutual accountability and JSRs is reflected *on the ground*. Specifically, the study addresses **two key questions**:

1. **How are JSRs perceived by stakeholders as promoting (mutual) accountability?** The study enriches the current rhetoric on stakeholder roles and responsibilities within the JSRs, as well as views on the broader concept of mutual accountability.
2. **How is mutual accountability likely to be affected by JSR effectiveness?** In examining the strengths and weaknesses of JSRs as currently practiced, the study suggests opportunities for policymakers and practitioners in the education sector to improve the effectiveness of JSRs in supporting mutual accountability. The study also points to areas where improvements may unleash the potential of JSRs to lock together policy planning and implementation through policy dialogue.

Why Mutual Accountability?

Mutual accountability is broadly understood here as *a compact under which two or more parties hold one another accountable for agreed commitments they have voluntarily made to one another*. The study selected this lens given the central role mutual accountability plays in the development context, which is characterized by the division of sector roles and responsibilities across a diverse range of stakeholders. Furthermore, the international aid environment has seen an increasing shift over the past two decades from an almost exclusive emphasis on *financial accountability* to *more meaningful partnerships*, in which all partners are held *mutually* accountable for development results. This shift is embedded in key international development agreements, including the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005), the Accra Agenda for Action (2008), and the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (2011).

The GPE 2020 Strategic Plan mirrors this shift and strives to support mutual accountability through *inclusive policy dialogue* and *monitoring*. The JSR is seen as explicitly supporting mutual accountability, with an emphasis on implementation of recommendations into future policy cycles. However, for JSRs to serve as an accountability platform, it is critical to first assess how *education stakeholders* understand accountability in the context of a JSR.

How Are JSRs Perceived as Promoting (Mutual) Accountability?

While there is general agreement on the value of JSRs as a forum for accountability, interviews with different stakeholders in the aid compact—government, development partners, and civil society representatives—show that they do not necessarily share an understanding of what the concept means in practice. Of particular interest are the *disparities between expectations of different stakeholders with respect to their and others' accountability roles within the JSR,* as well as *how the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) is viewed* within the compact.

Government officials in this study implicitly preferred *national ownership* of sector planning and implementation over holding other partners to account; for instance, none referred to JSRs as an accountability instrument for their donors. Accountability was instead described as operating mostly in one direction, with the *government bearing primary responsibility for delivery, in partnership with others*. Government officials typically felt that the JSR forum allowed them to show development partners, and donors in particular, how resources linked to a particular program have been used—an opportunity that in their view serves to reassure donors and builds trust in their capacity to develop robust plans and deliver on policy implementation. *Citizen accountability* was identified as the most important objective of JSRs, although government officials tended only to pay lip service to this function; this was discussed only in reference to ensuring that CSOs have a voice and are able to challenge government reporting.

Development partners tended to reflect the international development rhetoric highlighted in the definition above in a relatively homogenous way, describing the JSR as an *open forum* in which government and development partners are held equally accountable for outcomes. A number of development partners also highlighted the opportunity afforded by the JSR to evaluate their own

contributions to the implementation of policy. This reflects one enactment of mutual accountability, however, it simultaneously suggests a diminished focus on government ownership of plan implementation. In addition, development partners almost never actively highlighted the JSR as an instrument for government to hold donors directly to account, and there was little discussion of accountability with regards to *aid disbursement*, *aid predictability* or *technical support*. The importance of *accountability to citizens* (represented via CSOs) within the JSR process was assumed, though there was little focus on *how* CSOs form part of the mutual accountability contract.

CSOs, the most heterogeneous group in both their makeup and views, saw *governments and development partners* as jointly possessing the most effective levers for holding others directly to account. As was implicit in the comments of other stakeholder groups, CSOs tended not to draw clear lines of accountability for themselves even though, in some cases, CSOs may be directly responsible for implementing parts of the sector plan. CSOs tended instead to see themselves as performing a *challenge function*, considered by them as crucial to the JSR process, with JSRs also offering an effective lobbying forum. There was some reference to a tension between this role and their position as *outsiders* to the tight partnership between governments and development partners.

The JSR is assumed to be a key tool for mutual accountability in the aid environment. Yet, the perspectives presented here call for *a more nuanced model of mutual accountability* than is commonly applied in the development rhetoric. It appears that all stakeholders in the study agreed that in practice the main responsibility for improved education outcomes lies with *governments*. This study contends that plan implementation *is* ultimately the domain of government, with development partners primarily accountable for the provision of financial and technical support, and CSOs primarily accountable for serving a constructive challenge function. The JSR is then a vehicle that creates space for each of these stakeholder groups to coordinate and assess their efficacy in fulfilling their respective roles. Of course, the *JSR itself needs to be effective* if it is to support mutual accountability within this more nuanced understanding of stakeholder roles and responsibilities.

How Is Mutual Accountability Likely to Be Affected by JSR Effectiveness?

Though the literature suggests a relatively homogenous understanding of a well-performing JSR, experience in the field suggests otherwise. This study puts forward *five interconnected dimensions of effective JSRs*, building on a model developed within GPE as a framework for monitoring the quality of JSRs in GPE partner countries. The framework comprises *three key JSR characteristics*, namely that a JSR should be (1) participatory and inclusive, (2) aligned to a shared policy framework and (3) evidence based; and two core functions, namely that it should serve as (4) a monitoring tool and (5) an instrument for change embedded effectively into a policy cycle. The assumption is that JSRs demonstrating these interconnected five dimensions are more likely to serve as a mutual accountability platform. Below, each is considered in turn, with relevant findings from the study reviewed.

Dimension 1: "Participatory and Inclusive"

For a JSR to be participatory and inclusive, a diverse range of stakeholders are invited (*inclusion*) and the process supports appropriate engagement of those stakeholders (*participation*). This allows for

different voices, as well as facilitating the interaction of diverse and complementary functions and responsibilities, in turn supporting more robust policy formulation and implementation.

This study finds that ministries of education, at both the national and regional levels, along with development partners and CSOs, were typically present at JSRs. The attendance of the latter is encouraging, given the shift toward more actively including the voices of CSOs within the development compact. However, *the level of participation* of CSOs, which tended to see themselves as observers to the process, depended on both country context (for example, the degree of governmental support of transparency of dialogue) and CSOs' capacity to actively contribute. Especially concerning is the *lack of attendance by ministries of finance*: in one-third of JSRs with available information, no Ministry of Finance representative was present. This is problematic when considering the importance of advocating for increased domestic financing for education. More broadly, this may also suggest limited buy-in to the idea of JSRs as a tool for financial accountability at the national level, and poor coherence across sector and national financing frameworks. Also of some concern is the low attendance of parents associations (present in only half of JSRs with available information) and teachers unions (in only one-third of JSRs assessed), given that they are the primary beneficiaries of sector policy and key service delivery actors respectively, and therefore provide key perspective for on-the-ground realities.

Dimension 2: "Aligned to a Shared Policy Framework"

A JSR should be aligned to an *agreed-upon* policy framework, typically the education sector plan (ESP), that formulates common goals, states reciprocal commitments of all stakeholders (dimension 1) and outlines steps for action. Consensus among stakeholders on the framework against which a JSR is based is essential for strong mutual accountability, circumventing the emergence of divergent—and even competing—lines of accountability, as well as increased transaction costs.

The study takes the ESP and associated planning documents to be the key instruments for monitoring implementation and holding relevant stakeholders to account for assigned responsibilities. However, there appears to be a troubling disconnect between the *contents of ESPs* and *what JSRs actually monitor*, implying poor alignment of these tools, which is likely to jeopardize the lines of accountability. For example, a review of agendas and implementation reports utilized during JSR meetings reveals that in more than a quarter of cases, *all subsectors included in the original ESP* were not systematically covered in the implementation report, nor discussed during the JSR. Performance is even weaker when looking at *ESP activities by type of funding*. In particular, more than a third of JSRs do not comprehensively track *internally funded ESP activities*; that share is even larger (when considering whether JSRs discuss *activities funded by external partners*. At least half of the JSRs analyzed also addressed *activities not included in the ESP*, which may point to problems with the *initial quality and comprehensiveness* of the policy frameworks, or alignment of development partners to support it.

Dimension 3: "Evidence Based"

Sound policy dialogue can only be supported in the presence of a *robust and transparent evidence base* that evaluates progress toward key goals. As such, productive engagement across stakeholders requires the timely and widespread dissemination of relevant data, both quantitative and qualitative, produced by a variety of stakeholders, and most commonly shared with key stakeholders and the wider public in the form of government annual implementation reports. The presentation of quality evidence as part of JSR proceedings also serves to build confidence in government's implementation capacity, and curbs the need for parallel monitoring and reporting mechanisms.

All stakeholders prioritized the role of reliable data and reporting in determining the quality of JSR discussions, though government officials emphasized the *capacity challenges* linked to timely collection and analysis of robust data. Here, officials pointed in particular to the centrality of the *annual implementation report*, yet it was possible to obtain a report in only 29 JSRs out of the sample of 39. Also of concern is the fact that more than two-thirds of the 29 JSRs *with* annual implementation reports available *did not cover program expenditure*, suggesting that discussions on expenditure in these cases were not evidence based. Half of the JSRs with available information also *did not consider whether previous JSR recommendations* were followed up on during the course of the year. This is a particular weakness, and may be driven by poor delegation of responsibilities for actions; potentially resulting in a failure to incorporate meaningful and necessary changes into the next policy cycle (dimension 5).

Development partners highlighted the tension between *producing quality implementation reports* (international consultants are often viewed as having the skills to produce higher-quality reports) and *country ownership of that reporting. "Alternative" reports* brought to the table by CSOs in particular were viewed as useful for discussing issues identified by local communities and as ways of verifying data and analyses provided in government reports. However, when these shadow reports do not align with JSR documents produced by government, it presents challenges for the reconciliation of divergent views and voices. *CSO contributions to the evidence base* may also not be adequately reflected in JSR output documentation, such as the aide memoire.

Dimension 4: "Monitoring Tool"

Monitoring, or the review of sector performance over the past year, is often seen as the central function of JSRs. However, more than simple "education accounting" or review of sector implementation, *monitoring* should encompass a *learning function*, where identified shortcomings are exploited for the lessons they offer about how to improve implementation moving forward. Good monitoring also requires the use of quality and on-time evidence (dimension 3) to understand what is (and what is not) working, while aligning the JSR to a clear policy framework (dimension 2) sets the appropriate parameters for monitoring performance*.

Almost all JSRs in this study were based on the discussion of "significant items" within the education sector, such as identifying implementation problems in order to better understand why targets are not achieved. However, JSR discussions were primarily organized around issues directly related to *educational outcomes*, and disconnected from the monitoring of corresponding *financial concerns*. There appears to be a bias in favor of the presentation of activity-oriented evidence rather than evidence on expenditures. Furthermore, relatively *low levels of monitoring performance on past JSR recommendations* is also of concern as this may translate into limited follow-up on key weaknesses identified during the previous review.

Dimension 5: "Instrument for Change Embedded Effectively into a Policy Cycle"

A JSR is effective only when it has served as a management and support tool that results in improved processes and generates better sector results. Arguably all of the aforementioned dimensions need to be present for this to occur. This dimension highlights the importance of a mechanism for *formulating and following up on JSR recommendations* as well as the *timing of the JSR*, which should ideally be aligned with sector ministries' planning and budgeting cycles (i.e., embedded effectively into a policy cycle) in order for the JSR to be an instrument for change.

The JSR process concludes with the drafting and validation of a JSR report based on the discussion and recommendations produced during the JSR proceedings. The study suggests that these recommendations provide a record of JSR findings regarding *priority issues identified* and *remedial actions proposed*. Recommendations also reinforce to which parties particular responsibilities are assigned, and who should be held accountable for delivery at the subsequent JSR. JSR recommendations should be focused, relevant and well crafted if they are to have an impact, yet are frequently critiqued as being just the opposite. However, a review of JSR reports suggests some encouraging signs. For example, more than half of the aide memoires examined *limited the number of recommendations*, included recommendations that detailed *roles and responsibilities*; and/or included *specific remedial actions*. However, less than one-third included a *timeline*, which arguably jeopardizes the likelihood of immediate operationalization. As suggested earlier, there are also *few clear mechanisms for follow-up* within the JSR process and *timing of the JSR* is often not aligned with sector ministries' planning and budgeting cycles, further hindering implementation of actions toward a forward-looking consensus. Although it is generally agreed that a JSR report should reflect agreement across the spectrum of stakeholders, interviewees described the drafting of the report as being weighed down by political negotiation and tensions between stakeholders with different views.

Key Take-Aways for Policymakers and Practitioners

While the study identifies operational shortcomings of JSRs in the education sector today, it also points to *tractable solutions that would strengthen JSR effectiveness and ultimately mutual accountability*. Specifically, policymakers and practitioners may want to address these key questions:

1. **How can we ensure the JSR process is truly participatory and reflective of all stakeholders?**
   - Achieving this requires a balance of 'the right people' and 'the right number' in order to facilitate quality policy discussions and the inclusion of multiple perspectives. Specifically, how can policymakers and practitioners ensure more meaningful CSO engagement, particularly given the key role this group is envisaged to play under international development agreements? The study recommends *clarifying CSOs' accountability in the JSR process* and *providing adequate support* (technical, financial and logistical) to any stakeholders (including parents associations and teachers unions) who may not otherwise have the capacity to fully engage. It is important to recognize that engagement is limited not only to the JSR meeting, but also encompasses preparation and follow-up.
   - Secondly, given the importance of coherence across national and sector financing frameworks, and the high stakes of advocating for increased education budgets—and the importance of financial reporting within mutual accountability—the study strongly recommends *securing the attendance of finance ministries at JSRs*.
   - Improved intra-governmental dialogue and timing of the JSR to align with ministries' planning cycles represents an important mechanism to improve the efficiency of service delivery.
   - Ensuring there is enough time and space for discussions, and having professional moderators who can effectively facilitate exchanges, are among the practical suggestions to improve *how a JSR is organized* and therefore how it might support better dialogue during the procedure.
2. **How can shortcomings in the planning and reporting instruments of the JSR be addressed?**
   - Given the important role of the ESP in creating a shared platform for discussion, greater effort should be invested in *ensuring coherence between the planning document and what the JSR reviews*. Specific questions to consider include, whether or not generating a JSR agenda based on the ESP

translates into poor consensus around JSR outcomes for different stakeholder groups, whether this is due to a partial use of the ESP as the reference instrument, or whether other monitoring frameworks were used for conducting the sector review. If it is the case that the initial policy instrument is of poor quality, the *JSR offers an opportunity to generate remedial mechanisms to address this going forward*.

- The study supports *more robust application and construction of the annual implementation report*, especially given its centrality as the basis for quality discussions and presentation of evidence on results achieved.

- There is also an opportunity to significantly strengthen the evidence base from which JSRs operate by *addressing the gap in financial reporting* within the process. *Greater provision of technical support* for gathering this kind of evidence needs to be considered. Furthermore, production of the annual implementation report should be viewed as an opportunity to support existing government reporting systems.

- The study contends that, if properly facilitated, *field visits* for a JSR might provide additional evidence on sector implementation at regional levels as well as important insights into realities at the school and classroom levels.

3. **How can the monitoring and evaluation tool of JSRs become more meaningful and translate more effectively into policy change?**

- Effective monitoring should encompass a *learning function*, to which all stakeholders should contribute.

- As alluded to earlier, bias toward presentation of *activity-oriented evidence* rather than *evidence on expenditure* needs to be addressed if JSRs are to better support intra-sector dialogue around the appropriate (re)distribution of resources.

- Discussions ahead of the JSR could build consensus and help with the development of formalized recommendations at the conclusion of actual JSR proceedings. Furthermore, *follow-up mechanisms to systematically review previous JSR recommendations could be introduced or strengthened*. For the JSR to be an instrument for change, it should be also *aligned with the timing of sector ministries' planning and budgeting cycles.*

This study envisages an effective JSR as providing a platform to facilitate *flexible and adaptive planning.* By fully exploiting its potential as both a backward- and forward-looking multi-stakeholder diagnostic tool, the JSR can serve as a valuable interim forum that enables timely remedial changes and course correction to the sector plan.