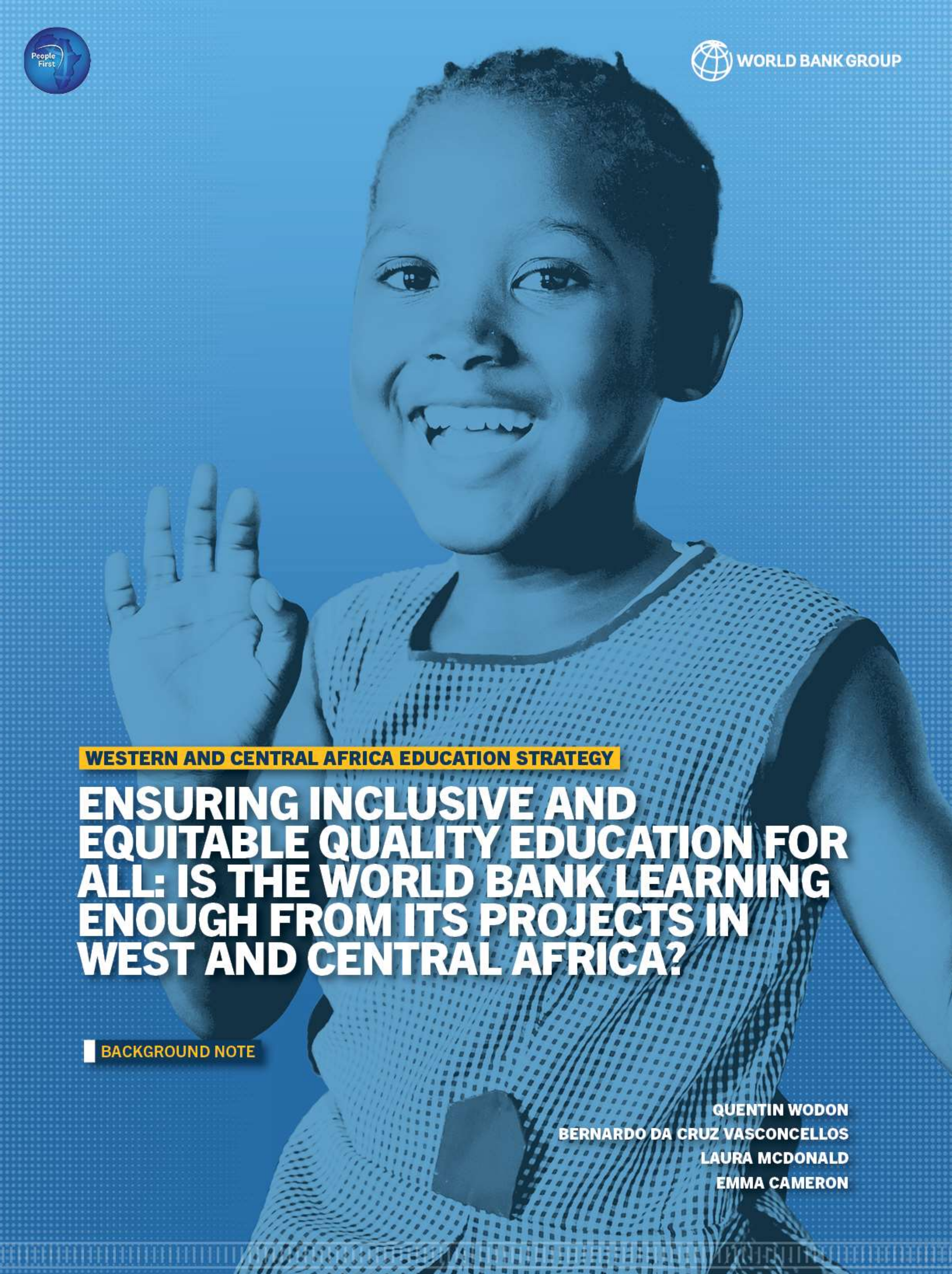

WORLD BANK GROUP

WESTERN AND CENTRAL AFRICA EDUCATION STRATEGY

ENSURING INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL: IS THE WORLD BANK LEARNING ENOUGH FROM ITS PROJECTS IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA?

BACKGROUND NOTE

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ENSURING INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL: IS THE WORLD BANK LEARNING ENOUGH FROM ITS PROJECTS IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA?

BACKGROUND PAPER FOR THE WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA EDUCATION STRATEGY

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Contents

Abbreviations

GPE	Global Partnership for Education
IBRD	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ICR	Implementation Completion and Results Reports
IDA	International Development Association
IEG	Independent Evaluation Group
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation

Abstract

The World Bank is the largest donor for education in low-and middle-income countries, but apart from providing financing, it also aims to serve as a 'knowledge bank'. The knowledge generated by the World Bank that tends to be the most visible comes from a wide range of reports as well as research. But is the World Bank learning enough from its projects? To provide a tentative answer to that question, this paper considers the case of the World Bank education portfolio in West and Central Africa, the region of the world with the worst educational outcomes in terms of both educational attainment and achievement. The assessment of whether the World Bank is learning enough from its projects is mixed. On the one hand, the World Bank's education portfolio in the region has grown not only in size but also in quality, at least as measured by ratings from the Independent Evaluation Group (IEG). But on the other hand, the lessons learned from projects as they are shared in Implementation Completion Reports tend to be fairly generic and, therefore, not always very useful or precise for operational work.

Keywords: Education financing, evaluation, World Bank, West and Central Africa

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, the World Bank approved more than US$66 billion in funding for education globally. New commitments have been increasing rapidly in recent years (World Bank, 2021), in part because of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. But in addition, because of the adoption of the Human Capital Project (World Bank, 2019), the World Bank has started to place more emphasis on the social sectors (Education; Health, Nutrition, and Population; and Social Protection and Labor) once again.

Beyond providing funding for education in developing countries, the World Bank also aims to be a leader in knowledge work, especially for education on issues related to 'learning poverty'. The 2018 World Development Report highlighted the fact that many developing countries were experiencing a learning crisis (World Bank, 2018). A year later, a new measure of learning poverty was introduced based on the share of 10-year-old children who are not able to read and understand an age-appropriate text. The analysis suggested that 53 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries were learning poor (World Bank, 2019). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion is nine in every ten children. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have exacerbated this situation as schools were closed in most countries for lengthy periods of time. In the absence of adequate infrastructure (including a lack of internet connectivity) and preparation for distance learning, most children are likely to have fallen further behind, resulting in large increases in learning poverty, which in turn requires adequate responses by education systems (World Bank, 2020a; World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF, 2021).

To respond to the learning crisis, the World Bank (2020b) adopted a new strategic approach to education: its vision is for learning to happen with joy, purpose, and rigor for everyone, everywhere. To guide policy work and operational support to countries, the World Bank suggests in this new framework to focus on five pillars: (1) Learners are prepared and motivated to learn; (2) Teachers at all levels are effective and valued; (3) Classrooms are equipped for learning; (4) Schools are safe and inclusive spaces; and (5) Education systems are well managed. In addition to these five pillars, the World Bank framework suggests five cross-cutting principles: (i) Pursuing systemic reform supported by political commitment to learning for all children; (ii) Focusing on equity and inclusion through a progressive path toward achieving universal access to quality education; (iii) Focusing on results and using evidence to keep improving policy; (iv) Ensuring financial commitment commensurate with what is needed to provide basic services to all; and (v) Investing wisely in technology.

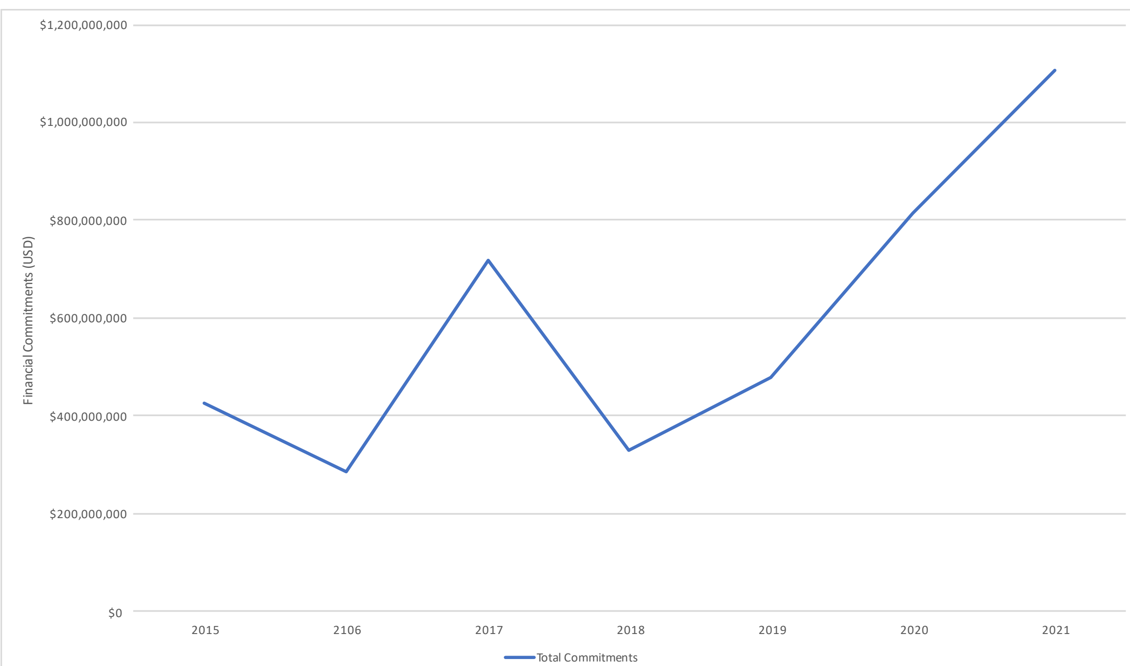
The new strategic approach of the World Bank to education is based on lessons from the literature and is fairly comprehensive, albeit with a few exceptions (for example, the World Bank framework is virtually silent on the role of private provision in education). Yet beyond strategic approaches, 'operations'—the quality of loans and grants and whether the World Bank and partner countries are learning from them—is where the rubber hits the road. Is the World Bank learning enough from its projects to contribute as best it can to achieving the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SD4), which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all? To provide a tentative answer to this question, this paper focuses on the World Bank's education portfolio in West and Central Africa, the region of the world with the worst educational outcomes whether in terms of educational attainment or achievement.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the next section, basic data are provided on trends in the education portfolio, and the types of activities that the portfolio is financing. In the following section, the methodology used by the Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) of the World Bank to rate projects is explained and the trend in ratings for projects is provided. In addition, insights from lessons learned in projects, as provided by project managers, are summarized. The message from the analysis of whether the World Bank is learning enough from its projects is mixed. On the one hand, the World Bank's education portfolio in West Africa has grown both in size and in quality, at least as measured by the ratings provided by IEG (which have clear limitations). However, on the other hand, the lessons learned from projects tend to be fairly generic and, therefore, not always useful. A conclusion follows.

2. Trend in World Bank Commitments for Education Portfolio in West and Central Africa

A separate paper by the authors documents trends in the World Bank's education portfolio for West and Central Africa (Wodon et al., 2022). From 2015 to 2019, while there were ups and down due to the approval of smaller or larger operations in any particular year, the size of the education portfolio in the region was relatively stable, with average new commitments of slightly below half a billion dollars per year. However, in the last two years, new commitments increased dramatically, reaching more than US$1 billion in 2021, in part because of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, because of the adoption of the Human Capital Project, investments in the social sectors increased (World Bank, 2019). Figure 1, reproduced from Wodon et al. (2022), provides the trend in commitments, including financing from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) which offers loans to middle-income countries such as Nigeria and from the International Development Association (IDA) which provides concessional loans and grants to the world's poorest developing countries. The data also include other grants, including funding provided by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE).

Figure 1. Commitments to education in West and Central Africa, 2015–21 (US$)



Source: Reproduced from Wodon et al., 2022 based on World Bank operational data.

The increase in World Bank commitments to education in West and Central Africa is remarkable. It is great news given the challenges faced by countries to improve their education systems, and in particular reduce high levels of learning poverty. As mentioned in the introduction, estimates suggest that nine in every ten children aged 10 may not be able to read and understand a simple, age-appropriate text. However, one concern raised by Wodon et al. (2022) is the fact that only a relatively small share of the active education portfolio for West and Central Africa focuses on primary education. This may reduce the ability to improve learning in the early grades—a priority to improve education outcomes.

Another point made by Wodon et al. (2022) is that while there has been a large increase in World Bank education financing for the region, World Bank financing still accounts for only a small share of public funding for education in those countries. Back of the envelope calculations based on the current active portfolio suggest that World Bank financing may only account for 2.5 percent of public funding for education, and less than two percent of total funding for education when private financing is also accounted for. One of the implications of this striking result is that beyond financing, what matters probably even more to improve educational outcomes is the knowledge and technical assistance that the World Bank may provide through its loans, grants, and advisory work. But for this work to bear fruits, the World Bank needs to learn from its projects, a question to which we turn in the next sections.

3. Methodology for the Evaluation of World Bank Projects

One way to assess whether the World Bank is learning from its projects is to look at trends in the quality of the education portfolio. While the education portfolio has grown in West and Central Africa, what can be said about its relevance, efficacy, and effectiveness? To assess quality, we rely on the fact that every World Bank project is assessed first by World Bank staff, and next by the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group (IEG). IEG is, in principle, independent of the management of the World Bank since it reports to the World Bank's Board of Executive Directors. Therefore, one could argue that IEG evaluations are also independent of World Bank management. This is true, although it should be noted that IEG project evaluations are based on reports written by World Bank staff or consultants which are reviewed and approved by World Bank management. IEG bases its own assessment on those reports and on governments' own project completion reports or summaries of such report without conducting additional data collection or interviews. In practice, IEG project ratings are based on a reading by IEG staff of the information provided by World Bank staff in their Implementation Completion and Results Reports (ICRs) carried out following the closing of a project.

IEG provides an overall outcome rating for all completed World Bank projects. That overall rating is a function of individual ratings in three key areas: (1) Relevance of objectives; (2) Efficacy, which is defined as whether a project's development objective has been achieved; and (3) Efficiency, which relates to how economically resources and inputs are converted to results, namely whether the costs of achieving the project's objectives were reasonable in comparison with benefits and recognized norms.

In order to assess the relevance of the objectives of a project, IEG considers that a project has high relevance if there is full alignment between the project's objectives and the country's strategy (both at the time of appraisal and at project closing), with the World Bank's country partnership framework being a key reference document. The rating is substantial if there is almost full alignment between the project's objectives and the country strategy, or minor misalignments in limited areas. Relevance is considered to be modest if there is only partial alignment between a project's objectives and the country strategy. Finally, relevance is negligible if there is very limited alignment between the project's objectives and a country's strategy. Most projects get rated as high or substantial in terms of the relevance of their objectives.

For efficacy, a high rating is obtained if a project fully achieved or exceeded its objectives (or intended outcomes), or is likely to do so. A substantial rating is achieved if the project almost fully achieved its objective (or intended outcomes), or is likely to do so. The rating is modest if the project partly achieved its objectives (or intended outcomes), or is likely to do so, and it is negligible if the project barely achieved its objectives (or intended outcomes), or is likely to do so. The key for a high rating is to define objectives carefully, so that they can indeed be achieved. Paradoxically, the less ambitious the objectives of a project are, the more likely it is that it will be highly rated for efficacy.

For efficiency, a similar approach to efficacy is used. Ideally, efficiency should be based on detailed cost analysis of projects and comparators, but this is rarely the case. Information on the project's economic or internal rate of return is also relevant.

The way in which ratings for relevance, efficacy, and efficiency are combined to obtain an overall rating are provided in Table 1. A project will be considered highly satisfactory if there are no shortcomings in the operation's achievement of its objectives, in its efficiency or in its relevance. This is rarely achieved. A satisfactory rating will be achieved if there are only minor shortcomings in the operation's achievement of its objectives, in its efficiency or in its relevance. For this to be the case, substantial ratings are needed on two criteria with a high on the third criteria, or when a substantial rating is achieved for efficacy with high ratings for relevance and efficiency. Finally, a project is considered moderately satisfactory if there were moderate shortcomings in the operation's achievement of its objectives, in its efficiency, or in its relevance. This will be the case with substantial (or high) ratings on two criteria—one of which must be efficacy—and a modest on the third criteria. The definitions for the three other ratings (Moderately unsatisfactory, Unsatisfactory, Highly unsatisfactory) are also provided in Table 3.

Table 1. IEG methodology for assessing the overall outcome of a project

Rating	Definition	Relevance Efficacy Efficiency	Comment
Highly satisfactory	There were <u>no</u> shortcomings in the operation's achievement of its objectives, in its efficiency, or in its relevance.	High on any two criteria—*one of which must be efficacy*—and at least substantial on the third.	Requires efficacy to be one of the high ratings.
Satisfactory	There were <u>minor</u> shortcomings in the operation's achievement of its objectives, in its efficiency, or in its relevance.	Substantial on all three criteria *or* Substantial on two criteria and high on the third *or* Substantial efficacy but high relevance and efficiency.	"Minor" shortcomings are implicitly defined as substantially achieving the objectives, and substantial or better on the other two criteria.

Rating	Definition	Relevance Efficacy Efficiency	Comment
Moderately satisfactory	There were moderate shortcomings in the operation's achievement of its objectives, in its efficiency, or in its relevance.	Substantial (or high) on two criteria—one of which must be efficacy—and modest on the third.	"Moderate" is implicitly defined as modest on one criterion.
Moderately unsatisfactory	There were significant shortcomings in the operation's achievement of its objectives, in its efficiency, or in its relevance.	Modest on any two criteria and substantial (or high) on the third, *or* Modest efficacy with substantial (or high) on the other two criteria.	"Significant" is implicitly defined as modest on two criteria or modest efficacy. Would also apply if one were high and two were modest.
Unsatisfactory	There were major shortcomings in the operation's achievement of its objectives, in its efficiency, or in its relevance.	Modest on all three criteria *or* Negligible on one criterion and modest/substantial/high on the other two.	"Major" is implicitly defined as three modest or at least one negligible.
Highly unsatisfactory	There were severe shortcomings in the operation's achievement of its objectives, in its efficiency, or in its relevance.	Negligible on all three criteria *or* Negligible on two criteria and modest/substantial/high on the third one.	"Severe" is implicitly defined as at least two negligible.

Source: IEG Guidance.

4. Trends in IEG Ratings

Table 2 and Figure 2 provide the data on overall performance ratings over time for completed education operations in West and Central Africa. Because in some years few operations were completed, the fiscal years have been aggregated with groups of three years taken together. There have been clear gains over time, with a decrease in the share of the projects rated moderately unsatisfactory or unsatisfactory, and an increase in those rated moderately satisfactory, satisfactory, and highly satisfactory, with these three ratings representing projects that meet minimum expectations.

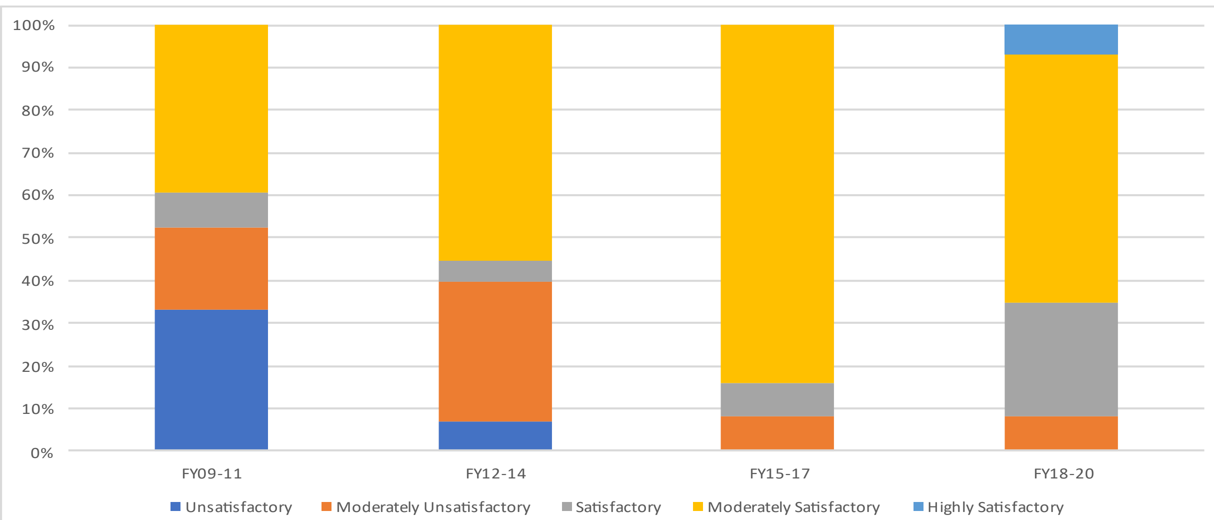
This is good news, but while projects may be achieving larger impacts in countries, this may not always be the case. For example, if project task teams are more careful, cautious, or conservative in how they define a project's objectives, particularly when defining targets to be reached (potentially based on projections from historical data), the objectives are expected to be achieved over the lifetime of the project. This in turn may result in higher ratings for efficacy and thus overall performance, but not necessarily in larger beneficial changes for education systems on the ground. Similarly, a more careful definition of objectives in line with country strategies may also help in increasing ratings for relevance, and again therefore overall performance.

Table 2. IEG overall performance ratings for West and Central Africa projects, fiscal years 2009–20 (%)

Fiscal years	Highly Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Moderately Satisfactory	Moderately Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Highly unsatisfactory
FY09–FY11	0%	8%	39%	19%	33%	0%
FY12–FY14	0%	5%	56%	33%	7%	0%
FY15–17	0%	8%	83%	8%	0%	0%
FY18–20	7%	27%	58%	8%	0%	0%

Source: IEG Data.

Figure 2. Overall performance ratings for education projects, 2009–20



Source: IEG Data.

Apart from providing an overall outcome rating for projects, IEG also rates projects in terms of the quality of World Bank management with three indicators: (1) quality at entry (when the project is designed); (2) quality of World Bank supervision; and (3) World Bank overall performance. The data are provided in Table 3 and suggest a similar trend, with much fewer projects rated moderately unsatisfactory or below over time.

Table 3. Additional IEG Ratings for West Africa Projects, Fiscal years 2009-20 (%)

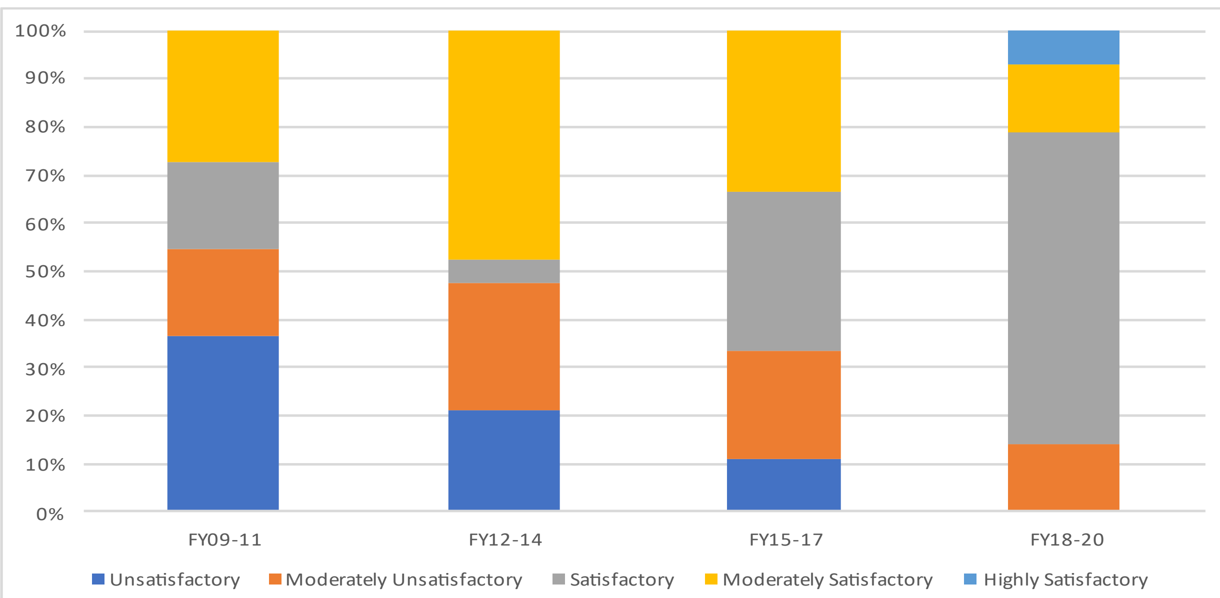
Fiscal years	Highly Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Moderately Satisfactory	Moderately Unsatisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Highly unsatisfactory
	Quality at Entry					
FY09–FY11	0%	18%	27%	18%	36%	0%
FY12–FY14	0%	5%	47%	26%	21%	0%
FY15–17	0%	33%	33%	22%	11%	0%

FY18–20	7%	64%	14%	14%	0%	0%
	Quality of World Bank Supervision					
FY09–FY11	9%	18%	27%	18%	27%	0%
FY12–FY14	5%	11%	68%	16%	0%	0%
FY15–17	0%	22%	67%	11%	0%	0%
FY18–20	7%	36%	50%	7%	0%	0%
	World Bank Overall Performance					
FY09–FY11	0%	9%	36%	18%	36%	0%
FY12–FY14	0%	5%	55%	35%	5%	0%
FY15–17	0%	11%	78%	11%	0%	0%
FY18–20	7%	29%	57%	7%	0%	0%

Source: World Bank operational data.

For example, Figure 3 displays the trends for quality at entry ratings. While more than a third of projects were rated unsatisfactory between fiscal years 2009 and 2011, this was the case for none of the projects over fiscal years 2018 to 2020. Similar trends are observed for the quality of World Bank supervision and World Bank overall performance.

Figure 3. IEG ratings for quality at entry (%)



Source: World Bank operational data.

Ratings are also available for the quality of ICRs and for project monitoring and evaluation (M&E). The data for the quality of ICRs are not shown here because categories for the assessment have changed in recent years, making comparisons less straightforward, but there seem to have been gains in the ratings. For M&E ratings, data on trends over time are provided in Table 6 with again large gains for education projects in the region when comparing the first three with the last three years.

Table 4. IEG performance ratings for West and Central Africa project M&E, fiscal years 2009–20 (%)

Fiscal years	High	Substantial	Modest	Negligible
FY09–FY11	10%	20%	40%	30%
FY12–FY14	0%	16%	68%	16%
FY15–17	0%	56%	44%	0%
FY18–20	0%	86%	14%	0%

Source: World Bank operational data.

The trends towards a stronger portfolio quality over time are not unique to education projects for West and Central Africa. Data can be visualized on the IEG website[1] for all projects related to four categories (the World Bank "networks"): (1) Equitable growth, finance and institutions; (2) Human development, (3) Infrastructure; and (4) Sustainable development. For projects related to human and sustainable development, substantial gains were achieved over time. This was not necessarily the case for projects related to equitable growth, finance and institutions, and infrastructure. Still, when all World Bank projects are included, substantial gains were achieved in performance ratings over time.

5. Lessons Learned in Implementation Completion Reports

While outcomes and other ratings provided by IEG for World Bank education projects in West and Central Africa have improved, another way to look at the data is to assess what lessons were learned from projects by project leaders (task team managers). Each ICR includes a set of lessons learned—typically three to five such lessons are suggested. Here, unfortunately, it does not seem that practical new lessons are being learned apart from lessons that should have been learned a long time ago. The language used in these lessons learned is fairly generic and broad.

Some of the issues mentioned include the need for stronger M&E systems, government buy-in, investments in training and capacity building, community engagement, clear project design, or adaptability, as suggested through a word cloud of some of the terms being used in Figure 4. There is no doubt that all this is very much needed and indeed crucial for project success, but the generality of these lessons learned suggests that beyond general principles, not as much is actually being learned as one would hope. This judgment is perhaps a bit harsh, and more details on lessons learned are available in the detailed discussion of project components within ICRs, but there is no escaping from a feeling of *déjà vu* in reading about the lessons learned as they are summarized in ICRs. Even if more details are provided in the core of the reports, it is not fully clear that sharp lessons are being drawn, and that they are indeed being learned as their integration into subsequent projects is not systematically tracked. For some projects that benefitted from more in-depth evaluations, for example, through impact evaluations of interventions, lessons are being learned through research papers that document those impact evaluations. But for run-of-the-mill projects, it is not clear whether project design and evaluation leads to

[1] See https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/data.

new lessons learned beyond general insights on the fact that without buy-in, M&E, or capacity, projects are less successful.

Figure 4. Word cloud on lessons learned from Implementation Completion Reports

Source: Analysis of implementation completion reports.

What could be learned from ICRs and more generally project implementation? This would depend on each project, but as one simple example, it could be very useful in terms of data on expenditures if we could know (1) whether projects actually focus on what is known to "work" versus interventions that tend not to improve educational outcomes; (2) how much implementing what "works" costs in particular settings or countries; and (3) whether what is assumed to "work" in the literature actually works in particular contexts (this would not require complex impact evaluations—simple data points can often be collected to have a rough idea of whether an intervention "worked").

Why is this needed? A recent World Bank (2020b) report provided recommendations for cost-effective approaches to improve learning in low-income contexts—one of the main challenges in West and Central

Africa.[2] Interventions in that report were categorized in four ways: as (1) Great investments: the most cost-effective interventions, like providing families with information on education returns and quality; (2) Good investments: other highly cost-effective interventions, such as: structured pedagogy combined with teacher training and learning materials; programs to teach children at the right skill level; and pre-primary education; (3) Promising low-evidence interventions: programs that appear to improve learning cost-effectively, but where more rigorous evidence is needed, like providing early stimulation to young children and involving communities in school management; and (4) Bad investments: interventions that (as typically implemented) have been shown to be either not effective or not cost-effective; these include investing in computer hardware or other inputs without making complementary changes (like teacher training or better school management) to use inputs effectively.

The guidance on what "works" in that report is useful, but still that report does not provide detailed information on the cost of various policies or interventions. These costs can vary greatly, and what is actually implemented can also vary greatly depending on contexts. For projects to be efficient in the IEG terminology mentioned earlier, we need to make sure that interventions are not too costly, and that they can bring benefits in particular contexts. World Bank projects are an invaluable resource for getting this type of intervention, but it is rarely done in a systematic way. Furthermore, given that findings from the literature provide a tentative identification of great and good interventions or investments, it would be useful to assess to what extent World Bank financing is indeed allocated to those types of investments. Data to that effect are unfortunately not available. Even knowing what is actually being spent, say, on teacher training is often not feasible: as mentioned in Wodon et al. (2022), all that can be estimated roughly by looking at project appraisal documents is the amount that was planned for teacher training when projects were conceived, as opposed to what was actually spent, and for which specific activities monies were spent (a lot of teacher training activities have actually been proven not to be very useful—*how* teacher training is provided is the key to achieving impact).

5. Conclusion

After a rapid review of trends in World Bank financing for education in West and Central Africa, the focus of this paper has been on whether the World Bank is learning enough from its projects. The conclusions are mixed. On the one hand, the quality of the education portfolio has improved markedly according to ratings by IEG. Despite limitations in these ratings, this is great news. At the same time, if one looks at the lessons learned sections of ICRs, one cannot escape a feeling that relatively few new lessons are being learned, given the generality of the discussion of these lessons learned. There seems to be a need to have more granularity in terms of assessing what works and what does not in World Bank projects. There also is a need to find ways to better assess to what activities funding is being allocated, and whether the activities are cost effective. Very little remains known about these questions today.

[2] These recommendations were made by the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel convened by the World Bank and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and hosted by the Building Evidence in Education Global Group. The mandate of the panel is to provide succinct, usable, and policy-focused recommendations to support decision making on education investments in low- and middle-income countries. In its first report, in order to provide guidance on what to do, and what not to do, the panel classified interventions that have been tried to improve learning in low- and middle-income countries into four classes.

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