



University
of Glasgow

The long-term impact of School Performance Review (SPR) in engaged schools and residual impact in past schools in Malawi

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Executive Summary

The objective of the data collection for this evaluation of Link Education International's "School Performance Review" (SPR) initiative in Malawi is to gather information from school leaders and education officials in order to understand the extent to which the SPR program has been adopted, the sustainability of changes in school quality, and the perceived cost-effectiveness of those changes. Additionally, the evaluation aims to understand what happens to the SPR processes and any sustained elements of Link's work after their engagement with the schools has ceased. Data collection was carried out in May 2022 and the report is structured to provide background on the SPR process, describe the methods used in the evaluation, explore unaddressed questions, and provide a conclusion.

The research design was developed collaboratively with Link Education International to address 5 research questions, aimed at engaged schools and formerly engaged schools, respectively:

Research Questions (RQs) focusing on SPR processes in engaged schools:

1. To what extent has School Performance Review (SPR) work been adopted?
2. To what extent have SPR processes produced sustainable changes in school quality?
3. What is the perceived cost-effectiveness of any changes in school quality?

Research Questions (RQs) focusing on schools where Link is no longer active:

4. What happens to the SPR processes when Link's engagement ceases?
5. Are there any elements of Link's work that are sustained after ceasing engagement?

In summary, the research findings suggest that the School Performance Review (SPR) process has been adopted and internalized as a *modus operandi* at the district level, with the School Improvement Cycle forming a focal point for the work of district offices. At the school level, SPR has also been adopted, with teachers reporting improvement planning as a way to address challenges and bring them to the attention of school leaders and district officials.

The study found evidence consistent with the view that SPR processes have produced sustainable changes in school quality, with improvements in retention and attainment being attributed to the implementation of the school improvement cycle. Informants reported improvements in retention and attainment as a result of these processes, and no one voiced scepticism about their impact. However, the study's small and purposive sample means that the findings should not be taken as final proof of impact.

The study also found that the SPR processes persisted after Link Education International's engagement ceased, with district offices continuing data collection and schools continuing improvement planning. Additionally, community involvement was cited as a reinforcing mechanism for the SPR processes. However, the study was not able to obtain credible data on the cost-effectiveness of these changes and more research is needed in this area.

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

Acknowledgements

This review follows on from previous desk-based research completed in 2019 (Hermannsson, Read & Odena, 2019). Discussions ensued immediately afterwards on conducting a more substantial second phase, the design of which was a collaborative effort between the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change at the University of Glasgow and Link Education International. Subsequently, the research team reached out to the School of Education, in Chancellor College, the University of Malawi, which played a leading role in implementing the fieldwork. Throughout, this has been a collaborative process, which has benefited directly and indirectly, from the goodwill and effort of a range of people that are not responsible for the contents of this report, but without which it would not have been produced. We wish to acknowledge their contribution before proceeding further.

First of all, the report has benefitted from the insights of informants in interviews and focus groups in Malawi that have generously taken time out of their busy days to share their insights, often informed by years of experience.

Behind every day spent collecting data in the field lie months and months of arranging contracts, research design, ethics applications, risk assessments, travel arrangements and so on. The project planning and research design was done in close collaboration with Link Education International, in particular, Chris Martin initially and then subsequently Angela Keenan, International Knowledge and Impact Manager. The collaboration was initiated by Dr Samantha Ross, International Programme Director, who has been a champion throughout. Various iterations, revisions and Covid-19-induced delays have been patiently supported by a range of finance and contract experts at Link as well as the University of Glasgow. Likewise, contracts and payments were ably facilitated by professional services colleagues at Glasgow and Chancellor College. Both institutions provided ethical approval for the project and we wish to thank our colleagues responsible for running those processes and the anonymous reviewers for their work.

Harold Kuombola, Country Director, and Innocent Ng'oma, Team Leader, for Link Education Malawi kindly advised on the conduct of fieldwork and the staff in Link's regional office in Dedza, providing good company and a well-equipped office when good internet connection was required. Dr Symon Chiziwa, Senior Lecturer Chancellor College, University of Malawi led the data collection, providing accuracy, context and nuanced insights into the narrative that interviewees gave. Trekkers Car Hire in Blantyre provided a sturdy 4×4 vehicle, which was

not over-specified for the terrain, and more crucially, the project benefited from the good humour and resourcefulness of our driver Dalitso, whose baby girl was born just days after fieldwork was completed.

Author Biographies

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Dr **Barbara Read** is a Reader in Gender and Social Inequalities in the School of Education, University of Glasgow. Barbara has over 18 years of experience as an educational researcher on international projects, ranging from elementary education to higher education sectors. She is particularly interested in issues relating to gender inequalities in education. She currently leads a three country research project, *Gendered Journeys*, which is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, due to end in December 2023. The project looks at the influence of gender on the experience of higher education for students studying STEM subjects, and their transition into skilled employment, in Rwanda, India and the UK.

Dr **Michele Schweisfurth**, a senior technical expert, is a Professor of Comparative and International Education at the University of Glasgow. She has expertise in qualitative research methods, especially interviews and classroom observation, and exceptional expertise in comparative methods in multi-country studies. She has researched and published widely and is an international expert on pedagogical change in lower- and middle-income countries, especially where critical and creative thinking and school performance review strategies are being promoted. She has been engaged in a range of relevant work including overseeing reviews of The Global Partnership for Education and FCDO's Girls Education Challenge, and been part of other reviews including UNESCO's Associated Schools Project Network of 7,000 schools globally, an evaluation of the Economic and Social Research Council's international fellowship and networking schemes, and a UNICEF study of Education and Emergencies in South-East Asia.

1 Introduction

Link Education International, an international non government organisation (INGO) with headquarters in Edinburgh, has for several years operated a school improvement initiative called “School Performance Review”¹ (SPR) in Malawi. SPR works with government education officials and school leaders in each country to strengthen the quality of education through improved governance and monitoring of quality indicators. The organisation recognises that previous evaluations of this work were driven by evaluation protocols of external funders and did not necessarily provide the organisation with the information it needed to make decisions about the future development and orientation of the SPR programme. Therefore, it approached researchers at the University of Glasgow to commission an evaluation of this work to address specific questions the organisation had identified about the long-term impact of this work on participating schools and what legacy the SPR work leaves behind once Link withdraws from schools. The Glasgow team in turn approached long-standing academic partners at Chancellor College, the University of Malawi, to collaborate on the development and implementation of the project. The primary data collection follows from a series of meetings with Link Community development to define the priorities of the project and a document-based scoping study carried out by the same research team in 2019 (i.e. Hermansson, Read & Odena, 2019).

The objective of the data collection is to gather testimonies from school leaders that work with the SPR process currently, and those who have done so in the past – as well as key informants in the education bureaucracies of each country, particularly school district officials. These testimonies are used to address the following questions:

RQs focusing on SPR processes in engaged schools:

1. To what extent has School Performance Review (SPR) work been adopted?
2. To what extent have SPR processes produced sustainable changes in school quality?
3. What is the perceived cost-effectiveness of any changes in school quality?

RQs focusing on schools where Link is no longer active:

4. What happens to the SPR processes when Link’s engagement ceases?

¹ Further information on Link’s approach to SPR can be found here - <https://linkeducation.org.uk/our-approach/> [accessed 27/2/23]

5. Are there any elements of Link’s work that are sustained after ceasing engagement?

The forthcoming structure of this report is broken down into three sections. Section 2 below draws on secondary sources supplied by Link to provide a background of the SPR process. The third section outlines the methods used and how they were implemented in this evaluation. The fourth section explores unaddressed questions and avenues for future research before the fifth concludes.

2 The SPR cycle in Malawi

This section provides a broad description of how Link’s **School Performance Review (SPR)** process is designated to operate in the context of Malawi. The summary of SPR in this section is based on a briefing note provided by Link at the research design stage in 2020 (Link Education International, 2020). Link stressed to the research team that since SPR worked predominantly with Ministry of Education staff to build capacity, there was a degree of separation between Link's work and the cycle itself as it functions at the school level. In practice, the SPR cycle is managed by ministry/district officials that then engage schools and related stakeholders.

SPR monitors individual school performance against common indicators of school success and ensures accurate data is available to all stakeholders about their school’s performance. The data is collected by **Primary Education Advisors (PEAs)** and experienced headteachers and shared with community stakeholders at **School Performance Appraisal Meetings (SPAMs)**. This enables stakeholders to tailor School Improvement Plans so that they can best meet each school’s individual needs – and critically allows them to make the best use of scarce school and district resources. SPR has been adapted for use in the education systems of Malawi, Ghana, Ethiopia, Uganda and South Africa.

In Malawi Link worked with the **Directorate of Inspection and Advisory Services (DIAS)**, and **District Education Offices** in **Mulanje** and **Dedza**, to develop SPR indicators and implement SPR in every school in these two districts between 2006 and 2015 with funding from the Scottish Government².

² Malawi School Improvement Project, 2006-2009; Malawi Inclusive Education Programme, 2008-2011; Supporting School Improvement in Malawi, 2012-2015

2.1 The “National Education Standards”, 2015

With technical assistance from Link³The Directorate of Inspection and Advisory Services led the process to develop a unified set of standards against which the performance of all schools in Malawi should be measured. The 26 **National Education Standards (NES)** draw on the School Performance Review indicators which MoEST and Link developed and tested in Mulanje and Dedza. After extensive consultation across the education sector, including all MoEST directorates, universities, and donor partners, the National Education Standards⁴ were endorsed by the Minister of Education, Science and Technology in 2015. The NES underpin the work of the inspection and advisory services and provides a common framework for school improvement for all stakeholders.

1.1. School Review, 2013 – 2020

Recognising improved transparency, accountability and evidence-based decision-making by schools and districts in Dedza and Mulanje between 2006 and 2013, DIAS requested Link to help integrate the SPR cycle into the core work of inspectors and advisors.

Link supported the Directorate of Inspection and Advisory Services (DIAS) to develop:

- the **DIAS Handbook**
- **Inspection and Reporting Guidelines**
- **Advisory Guidelines**
- **Advisory Manual**
- **Data collection tools** (paper, Schools Integrated Information System – SIIS – database and tablet app)
- **Reporting tools** (paper and electronic; national, district, school, and community levels)
- **Training packs** for the distinct roles of Inspectors and Advisors

In these documents, the SPR process is re-named **School Review** and is included under the core work of Advisors. SPAMs are re-named **Community Planning Meetings**. These

³ Support to the Inspection and Advisory Services (SIAS) Project 2013 – 2015, Scottish Government

⁴ *National Education Standards, Primary and Secondary Education*, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, May 2015.

documents are owned by DIAS and have been adjusted and updated by them⁵. “Tools and instruments are developed within MoEST to meet MoEST needs.” – Director, DIAS⁶.

The diagram below shows how the school improvement cycle operates at the school and zone/district government levels. The cycle should be timed so that School Improvement Plans are developed in time for the new academic year.

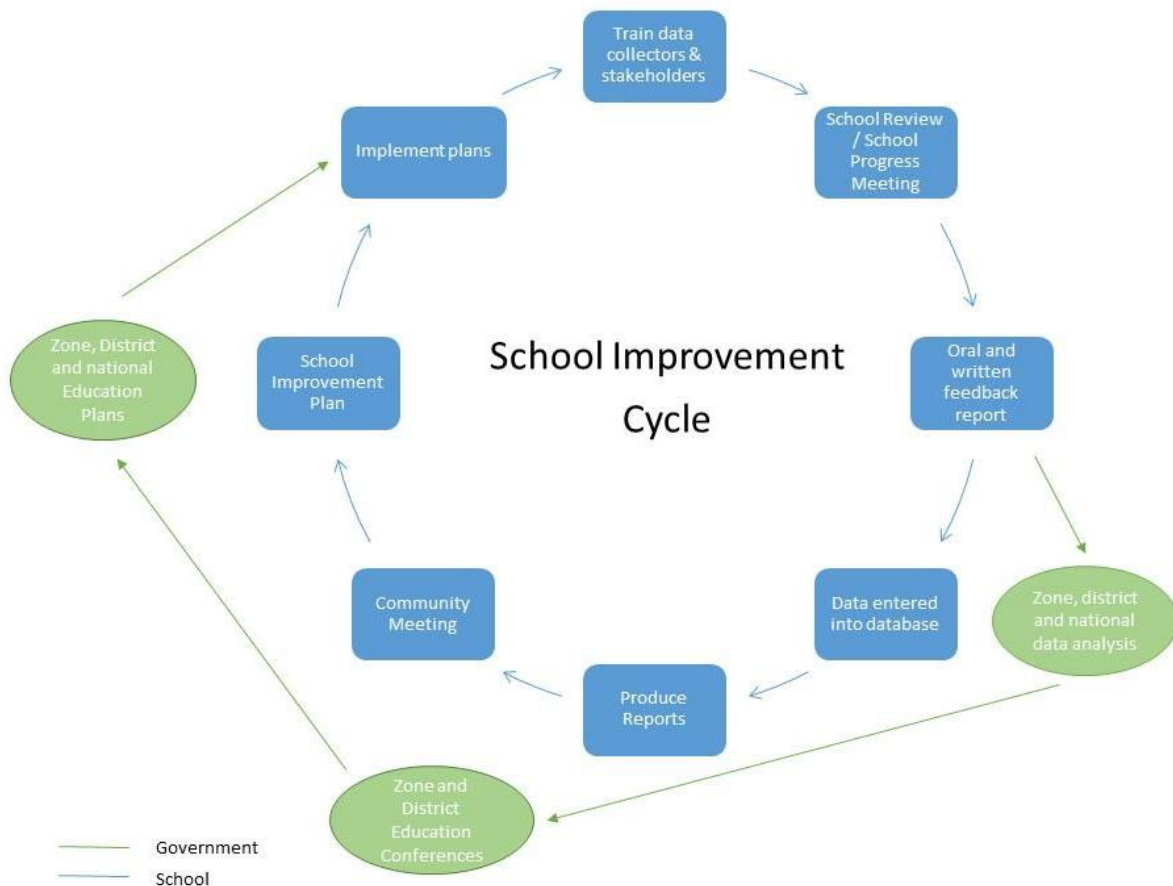


Figure 1. School Improvement Cycle..

The Schools Integrated Information System database is also used to produce a **Community School Report Card** which is shared with students, parents and community members. This is a visual representation of the school's performance against the National Education Standards and the progress made since the last review. It is a simple and effective way of sharing information

⁵ The latest full versions are from 2016, with some updates in July 2018. Copies of all documents are available from Link.

⁶ Integrated School Performance Improvement, Review, and Engagement (INSPIRE) Project Midline Evaluation, 2017

with parents and community members who cannot read. The Headteacher presents this at the Community Planning Meeting, where more detailed information about the school's strengths, weaknesses and recommendations for improvement are discussed.

In addition, a hand-written feedback report with additional observations from the Advisor or Inspector who has visited the school is left with the school administration.

Representatives from each school attend **Zone and District Education Conferences** where they share their schools' challenges and put pressure on the government to support them to improve conditions in schools.

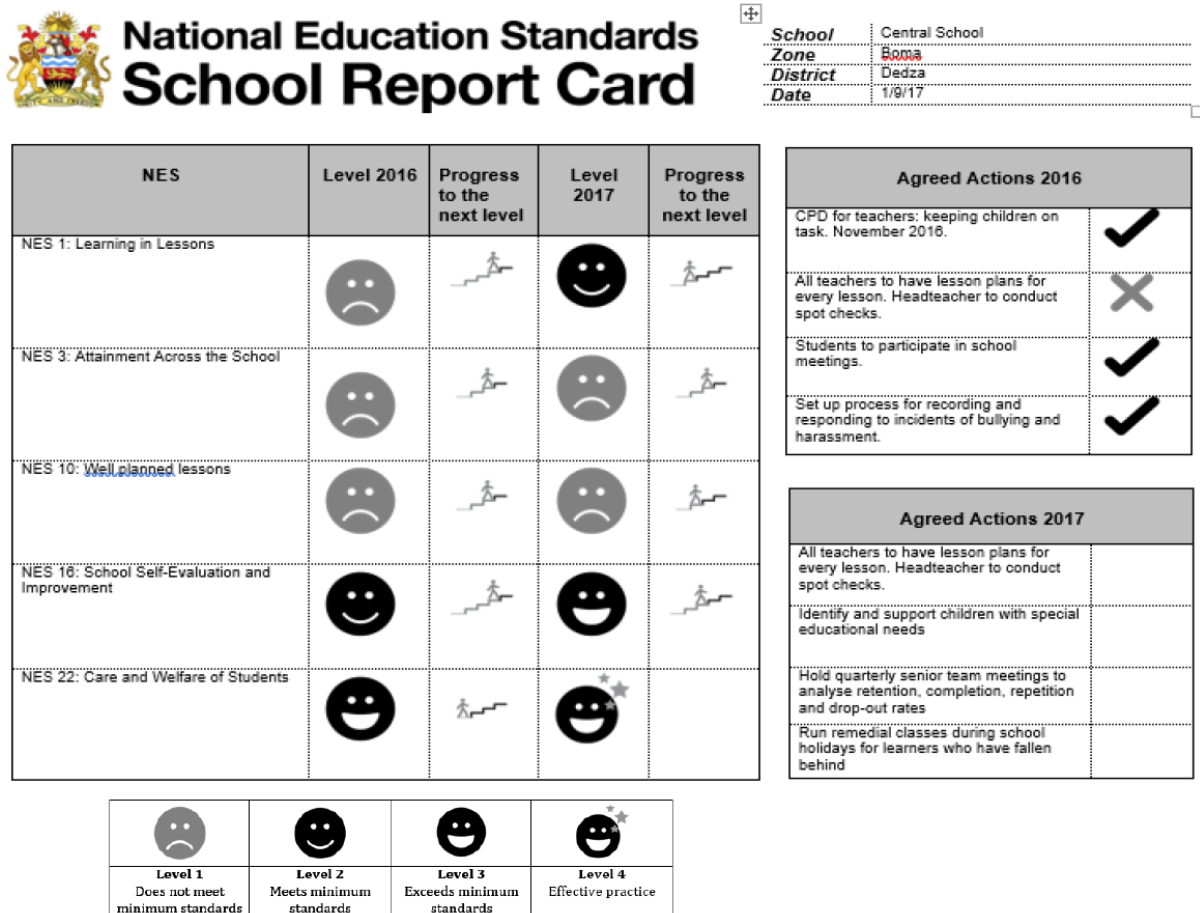


Figure 2. Community School Report Card, Malawi.

3 Methods

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. This was motivated by the need to engage directly with primary implementers of the SPR processes in schools to appreciate the impact of the educational reform from their lived experiences. To develop a deeper understanding and

thick description of changes resulting from the implementation of SPR reforms at different levels, a case study design was employed.

3.1 Study site and Recruitment of participants

The study was conducted in Dedza and Mulanje districts as these were target sites where Link implemented the SPR project with the support of the Ministry of Education. In all, six schools participated in the study. In Dedza, three schools were randomly identified from a pool of schools where Link's activities were still ongoing. While in Mulanje, three schools where Link had ceased its operations were randomly identified. This was deliberately done to find out how schools, where Link had ceased to operate, were faring.

PEAs, Headteachers and teachers were key participants in the study as they were deemed to possess the experience and information useful for this study. Table 1 provides a matrix of participants involved in the study:

Table 1: Study Participants

District/ No. of schools	Headteachers	Teachers	Primary Education Advisors
Mulanje (3 Schools)	3	3	2
Dedza (3 Schools)	3	3	2
Total	6 Interviews	6 FGDs	4 Interviews

In-depth interviews and focus group discussion [FGD] guides were used to engage participants mentioned in Table 2. These data collection tools focussed on Primary Education Advisors', Headteachers' and teachers' levels of familiarity with the SPR processes, perception of the impact of the SPR at the school level and the sustainability of the reform⁷.

3.2 Fieldwork

Researchers proceeded to collect data after ethical clearances were obtained from the University of Glasgow and the University of Malawi Ethics Committees⁸ District Education Managers of target districts of Dedza and Mulanje granted permission. Fieldwork was

⁷ See the interview and focus group discussion guides in 'Appendix 1 – Indicative Interview and Focus Group Schedules', pages 38-43

⁸ Examples of a blank Consent Form and Participant Information Sheet are enclosed in appendixes 2 and 3, pp. 44-46

conducted between the 4th and 9th of May 2022. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted and recorded with the consent of participants. Schools and individual respondents are de-identified in findings.

3.3 Transcription and coding

As indicated in table 16, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim into texts. This is meant to provide texts which could easily be subjected to analysis and interpretation processes. Transcribed texts were saved using easy-to-identify participant codes as shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2: List of codes for districts and participant categories

Category of participant	Dedza	Mulanje
3 Primary Education Advisor (Interviews)	DPEA 1	MPEA 1
	DPEA 2	MPEA 2
	DPEA 3	MPEA 3
3 Headteacher (Interviews)	DHT 1	MHT 1
	DHT 2	MHT 2
	DHT 3	MHT 3
3 Teachers (FDGs)	DFDG 1	DFDG 1
	DFDG 2	DFDG 2
	DFDG 3	DFDG 3

The use of the codes shown in Table 2 made it easier to identify the different categories of participants and allowed researchers to compare responses from different participants.

3.4 Analysis

3.4.1 Placing data into a purposeful framework

As a preliminary step in the data analysis process, a framework approach was adopted. Responses of the different categories were placed under the questions that were asked during interviews and focus group discussions. This approach allows researchers to at a cursory glance see how participants by category and district responded to similar questions. This made a comparative analysis of responses and triangulation of data possible.

3.4.2 Data Reduction

The texts emanating from the interviews and focus group discussions were lengthy and, in some cases, winding. We engaged in a process known as ‘meaning condensation’ for quotations that were deemed relevant to the study. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) define

meaning condensation as the process of abridging meanings expressed by interviewees into shorter formulations. In this respect, we compressed long sentences into shorter sentences without losing the meaning of the original sentence.

3.4.3 Meaning interpretation and thematic analysis

Meaning interpretation involves reading beyond the meaning that is immediately apparent in what the interviewee has said (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). In this study, transcribed texts from interviews were subjected to meaning interpretation to infer reasonable underlying motives and implications. Firstly, in this study responses by different participants were analysed in terms of the underlying meaning and motives. Secondly, we deliberately converted key research questions into thematic areas around which related responses from participants were clustered. This process assisted in addressing the research questions of the commissioned study and was conducted manually due to the relative volume of 16 interviews. Elsewhere we have discussed the use of software for thematic analysis with larger datasets, and conducted analyses with and without software (Odena, 2013; Odena & Burgess, 2017; Odena & Scharf, 2022).

4 Thematic findings

This section provides a discussion of the findings. The study focussed on the perceived impact of the SPR processes, an education reform that was introduced by Link in Dedza and Mulanje in Malawi. Primary Education Advisors and Headteachers were the main participants in this study and hence the perceived impacts of the reform were understood and discussed from their lived experiences.

4.1 Embedment of SPR within Education district structures

The Directorate of Quality Assurance Services was the focal entry point for Link. However, the actual rollout and implementation of SPR reform were at the education district level through Primary Education Advisors (PEAs). In their explanation of processes involved in SPR, PEAs were able to explain the roles that they played during the conception of the SPR activity and how they supported schools to adopt SPR processes. One PEA in Dedza explained that:

“First is at the education district level, we develop tools that are to be used for the school performance review. Thereafter data collectors are selected, and most are the primary education advisors. In the past, we even combined with some capable teachers from the zones to beef up the team. What happens is that

the team is phoned at the district level, and we go through the tool just to standardise and get internalised to the tools. From there we go to the schools now” **DPEA 1**

This was corroborated by another PEA in the same district who reported that:

“From the district, we as PEAs go to schools in a team of three. We arrive at schools early in the morning to check on the punctuality of both teachers and learners. When we arrive at the school we tell the Headteacher the purpose of our visit and him/her the activities that we are to conduct at that school. First of all, we observe the punctuality of both teachers and learners, observe lessons in class and then conduct interviews with various stakeholders, learners...boy and girl learners separately), School Management Team members, teachers and even the Headteacher”. **DPEA 2**

In the above excerpts, PEAs demonstrated knowledge of their respective roles in the implementation of the SPR innovations. These responses show that SPR reform was viewed as a framework for improving school governance, resource mobilisation, teaching and learning through the participation of key stakeholders; learners, parents and community leaders.

In this study, PEAs attested that they were involved in all key processes: discussion of the rationale of the SPR, development of the school evaluation checklist, school audit visits, and development of school improvement plan and monitoring. As such PEAs were well familiar with the demands of the School Review project.

The study has established that PEAs were key players in the implementation and monitoring of the SPR processes. At the school level, head teachers were facilitators of the SPR processes. Beyond head teachers, deputy headteachers, section heads, teachers, learners and community leaders participated in the consultative processes that culminated in the development of school improvement plans. It is interesting to note that head teachers did not report working directly with Link officers. It shows that Link had stuck to its strategy of working through existing education structures i.e. Education district officers and PEAs. This approach made it easier for

the adoption of the SPR reform as the changes introduced were not perceived as externally induced.

4.2 PEAs and headteachers' understanding of SPR

First, the study sought to establish PEAs', headteachers' and teachers' understanding of the SPR concept and what it entailed. In general, it was found that PEAs and Headteachers demonstrated a clearer understanding of what SPR reforms entailed and their respective role in ensuring its successful implementation. On the other hand, some teachers in focus group discussions appeared not to be familiar with the SPR concept. However, further probing showed that they were involved in the implementation of aspects of the school improvement plan.

A review of responses of PEAs understanding of the SPR processes involved showed that they were familiar with the SPR concept and its critical stages. Through in-depth interviews, PEAs were able to recall critical stages of SPR processes. One PEA involved in the study provided a detailed description of the SPR processes as below:

“When we come to a school, first we meet the head teacher, tell him why we are at the school, and we explain all the processes that will take place on that day because it is a full day event at the school. We also encourage the head teacher to inform teachers and learners so that when we visit the classes and we call them for interviews they don't hesitate to know what is happening. Normally, at the school what happens is to collect the data which can later on be triangulated and be used for reporting for the findings of the school. There is a head teacher's data form. [...] It captures much of the administrative issues of the school, issues like selection, number of teachers, the enrolment attendance that day [..]. And we have the classroom observation form where the data collectors are required to observe the lesson. Normally we are three members in a team and each member is requested to observe at least three lessons making it nine. We have an interview schedule for teachers, learners, and school community stakeholders. After collecting this information, the three of us meet to share the findings and reach conclusions.

From there we convene a gathering where all those involved in data collection gather and we share the findings where in the findings we are talking about issues that are done well that are successful and we also point out the areas for improvement. And if the school has some other issues which we feel are critical we also point out some critical issues at the school. We leave a copy of the report and get one of the same to the office. Now, when we are gone, we encourage the school to meet” **DPEA 1**

The above extract shows that the PEA in question had a thorough understanding of what the SPR processes involved. This was corroborated by another PEA in Mulanje who narrated that:

“Once they have made plans, they usually access funds from the government and they sit down with the community to make budgets. After budgeting, they procure materials, maintain structures and even procure some of the resources such as textbooks. After using these funds they come back together for a review. Whenever they have included a project in the school improvement plan that project is being monitored by the school and the community as well as”

MPEA 1

The above citations show the level of clarity of the SPR reform and how PEAs perceived their roles to be in the SPR processes. Headteachers involved in this study showed familiarity with SPR. One Headteacher in Mulanje explained that:

The SPR project has been implemented in a number of ways for instance community through school government bodies, they have managed to make bricks, collecting river sand, stones and the like in readiness for identifying any donors to support any kind of development they wish to build./ As head teacher, what I have been doing is to sensitise the community about their roles to play at the school.” **MHT 3**

Similar views were shared by teachers in a focus group discussion in Dedza who explained that:

“It (school improvement plan) guides what the teachers are doing in school. It involves the projects we do in school, procuring of resources, the suggestions on where we can get the resources. It is like we are selling our school to others who want to help the school. Exposing what the school is able to do. We involve the community, stakeholders in planning.” **DFGD 3**

Based on the descriptions of SPR as explained by headteachers, it is evident that headteachers had a clear understanding of the SPR. This level of understanding is critical in understanding the quality of their participation in the SPR processes.

Selected teachers, in focus group discussions, were asked to share their understanding of the SPR processes. In general, the study found that their understanding of the concept was not at the level of PEAs and headteachers. However, they were able to recall some of the activities that they were involved in which were part of the SPR processes. Teachers in focus group discussions in Dedza reported that:

“We meet and discuss. Some of the activities are developed from the review. After we have observed that there is a need. We meet and discuss ways of addressing those needs. In planning. In the course of planning we are also involved in the implementation. Keeping records too.” **DFGD 2**

The above extracts by teachers show that while they were less familiar with the SPR concept and its critical stages, they were actively involved in school improvement activities in their roles as teachers.

The findings of the study indicate that PEAs and Headteachers demonstrated awareness of the SPR cycle and the need to review the implementation process every three years. School management that included head teachers, deputy head teachers and section heads acquired skills to facilitate SPR processes at the school level. Headteachers interacted with SPR

processes on the second tier but were fundamental to ensuring the successful implementation of the reform. Headteachers involved in the study consistently showed that they were familiar with and had a clear understanding of the SPR processes. Their responses showed a vivid recollection of the roles they played to actualize the intentions of the reform.

4.3 To what extent has SPR been adopted

The study was concerned with the extent to which SPR as a reform activity was adopted at the school level. An engagement of the PEAs, headteachers and teachers showed that they were not only familiar or aware of the SPR concept but they were principal agents implementing the reform at the school level.

Several headteachers involved in this study also commented on having acquired the capacity to manage SPR processes. One Headteacher in Dedza reported that :

“Review schools are very important and they (SPR) are part of the school management, it is assisting us in how schools can better be managed, so these are very important. They will continue because they are documented like our case. We are saying that myself and my friend are new but we still have files which show how things were being done or how things can be done. So we are using that background to manage the SPR processes.” **DHT 2**

One Headteacher in Mulanje shared his experience of the training sessions and how implementation was done:

“We were trained about taking part in developmental projects by initiating plans on how we can go about with school in terms of development by also sensitising the community to take part in those developmental projects. By then we were oriented by our PEAs and other ministry officials. ...We learnt that as a school we should not always look for external assistance, whenever we have a challenge we should be able to find solutions on our own, we can meet our needs on our own unless there is a shortfall when we can go out and consult well-wishers.” **MHT 1**

The above responses in the above excerpt illustrate how the majority of headteachers that were interviewed understood the demands of the SPR processes. It is also evident the implementation of SPR processes had become part and parcel of the normal school routine.

4.4 SPR processes and sustainable changes in school quality

The adoption of SPR reforms at the school level meant a participatory and systematic approach to improving school governance, identifying school-level problems, identifying school priorities and developing a school improvement plan. The study has shown that the adoption of SPR processes resulted in changes that resulted in an improved learning environment.

Several teachers involved in focus group discussions reported observing that SPR processes contributed to effective teaching and learning as highlighted in the extract below:

“One of the changes is that most learners are able to read in the lower classes. The challenges we are facing now is the inadequacy of teaching and learning mmm especially textbooks. Also Std. 8 results are improved. A good number have been selected to conventional secondary schools. However, outcry is the number of learners who go to national secondary schools. However, the teachers mentioned lack of resources such as books as one of the challenges they face.”

DFGD 3

As can be noted from above, the teachers that were consulted take the view that the adoption of SPR contributed to improved learning outcomes and increased transition rate to secondary education among learners.

Through SPR processes schools acquired the ability to mobilise communities to participate towards the achievement of school improvement plans. Majority of headteachers reported that through SPR processes, they were able to mobilise parents to support the construction of school blocks, head teachers' offices and learners' toilets. One Headteacher in Mulanje reported that:

“So we can say that some people have changed their mindset in terms of development activities that are being conducted here at school. so that is a very good example because in the past days things of this nature were not available but this time we are able to call the community to come and assist us in other words. So SPR I think has done a great thing to our institution. and just to add on that one even teachers have been assisted because they are now using different methodologies to teach learners and they are also aware that they need to have documents as a teacher so they are managing these effectively.”

MHT 2

This position was further corroborated

“Learners' performance, surroundings, and infrastructure have changed. The school has built more infrastructure. I think cooperation has increased. There is cooperation among the community, teachers and learners. We are all working together.” **DFGD 2**

In Dedza, one PEA explained that SPR processes resulted in the construction of school infrastructure such as classrooms. He recounted that :

“The coordinated approach in school management between the school teachers and the community is one of the positive results of the school performance review, schools. Kapalamula school had a shortage of classrooms, and almost annually, every school performance review was mentioning of learners having nowhere to sit, and the school planned to have or identify some well-wishers who could assist in the construction of the school classrooms.” **DPEA 1**

In agreement with the DPEA1, the DPEA2 also explained that the changes experienced through the school review are sustainable. he also mentioned infrastructure and community involvement as some of the strategies that have contributed to high retention rate in schools under his jurisdiction as highlighted in the following extract:

“... For example, most schools now have change rooms, so that girls are safe when they are at school. Retention of learners has also improved especially because of the sensitization that we conduct in communities to encourage learners to go to school.”

DPEA 2

As can be seen in the above excerpt, the SPR processes were seen by key actors to assist schools in actively engaging stakeholders for support to construct classrooms in response to their needs based on the school improvement plan.

One Headteacher (DHT2) in Dedza made an interesting revelation when he observed that the SPR processes had resulted in mindset change for most stakeholders and duty-bearers. He observed that “it seems the mindset of the people has changed. This has assisted in the construction of a classroom block”.

Another Headteacher in Mulanje shared a similar sentiment and added that as a school a woodlot programme was initiated as a result of the SPR processes. He explained that :

“I mean that when you move from where we are, within our school premises you can find a woodlot there, that woodlot programme was initiated by the school and this time we can get firewood out of that woodlot because it is an outcome of the programme, another thing is that school block that is there was a dilapidated state so after the programme we were able to renovate that school block and now that school block is in good condition and if you happen to go there you can also witness.” **MHT 1**

In all the education districts involved, headteachers embrace the need for stakeholder involvement in school management and improvement. These stakeholders included chiefs, parents, and religious and community leaders. In Mulanje, one PEA observed that key

stakeholders were involved in SPR processes. He further elaborated on the range of stakeholders involved in SPR activities:

“Not much because when we are talking of stakeholders we have got the village heads themselves, PTA, SMC, mother group committees and even child-friendly protection workers who usually look after learner's problems in schools as well as in homes because learners can be abused at either of these places. So child protection workers must report such cases to reliable offices. So we try as much as possible to involve each group even in meetings when they are making school improvement plans, they involve learners themselves.”

MPEA 1

One PEA in Mulanje observed that SPR processes had empowered headteachers with skills to develop school improvement plans that are being used to prioritise and optimise the use of school funds and resources. He reported that :

“School improvement plans introduced through SPR reforms have been helpful. Headteachers are now able to procure textbooks using funds from the government which is being funded through SIG (School Improvement Grant) based on these plans” **MPEA 2**

This was corroborated by another Headteacher who reported that:

“It was really being done after three years. After three years we had another review. After three years we had another review, but because I am new we don't know when the last one was done but it was done after three years to see how we were improving or not improving. We had copies and we have copies for the reviews and we see how things are being conducted, when there are some areas to improve, we improve on those areas so each review is assisting us to know some of the areas that need to be improved.” **MHT2**

As can be seen in the above excerpt, the SPR processes assisted schools in actively engaging stakeholders for support to construct classrooms in response to their needs based on the school improvement plan.

One Headteacher (DHT2) in Dedza made an interesting revelation when he observed that the SPR processes had resulted in mindset change for most stakeholders and duty-bearers. He observed that “it seems the mindset of the people has changed. This has assisted in the construction of a classroom block”.

One of the key pillars in Link's theory of change is community engagement. Through experiences shared by PEAs, Headteachers and teachers involved in this study, community members participated in the production of the school improvement and provided resources and labour to improve learning conditions in schools. Through the SPR implementation community members exercised their right to participate in development projects in their respective areas SPR processes were introduced to improve teaching and learning conditions for positive educational outcomes. In this study, PEAs, Headteachers and teachers were able to isolate some positive outcomes that were directly attributable to the implementation of SPR processes.

4.5 Drivers of change

As discussed above, the adoption of SPR processes at the education district, zonal and school levels was smooth and easily embraced. Thus, the study was concerned with identifying the key enablers for the successful adoption of the SPR reform at district and school levels.

The study findings indicated that mindset change and unity of purpose were enablers of positive change and lubricated the change process. One PEA in Mulanje reported that:

“In particular, at schools when we talk of stakeholders there are school management committees, these committees nowadays work very hard because they know that whatsoever they are doing at their school is theirs, so they have changed their mindsets while in the past they were taking the school as if it is not for them but the teachers. Even Group Village Heads take part in mobilising learners to go to school, they even formed by-laws so that anybody absent should face the law. The laws also fight against school dropouts, especially among girls who get married early or get pregnancies” **MPEA 1**

The success of the SPR was attributed to effective communication and good interpersonal relationships that prevailed between Link and district education officers. One PEA reported that:

“The way the Link officials handled the education sector, I can say there is good communication and good relationship because they work with already existing structures so before anything they consult these structures. They are not working in isolation.”

DPEA 2

These sentiments were corroborated by other PEAs involved in the study. The study found Link's adherence to the principles of transparency and accountability as important enablers for earning the trust and confidence of key education officers at district level. One PEA in Mulanje observed that the quality of Link's conduct was largely responsible for the success of rolling out the SPR processes. He recalled that :

“Link encouraged us to be always transparent and accountable so these two words had to be preached everywhere and as we were doing that, people had confidence in stakeholders thus why Link at the school I was heading, was producing good results.” **MPEA 2**

The success of the SPR was also attributed to the hardworking spirit and commitment of teachers. Teachers in a focus group discussion reported that:

“We can say that the factors are both personal and financial. In terms of personal factors, teachers are dedicated, working together with other stakeholders. National Education Standards gives us some guidance to follow and work hard because on our own we cannot manage.” **DFGD1**

It is apparent from above, the SPR reforms were readily adopted because teachers were keen to improve conditions at their respective schools.

4.6 Positive outcomes

Assessing the impact of the SPR requires a comparative analysis of the prevailing situation against baseline indicators. However, in this study, the focus was on the positive outcomes that PEAs, headteachers and teachers attributed to the adoption of SPR.

In this study, PEAs, Headteachers and teachers were able to isolate some positive outcomes that were directly attributable to the implementation of SPR processes. One Headteacher in Dedza shared similar observations:

“School review was helping us to know our strengths and our weaknesses for the sake of progress, so whenever they [LINK and PEAs] were visiting us, they were looking at successes and looking at challenges as well and maybe assist us on how those challenges could be assisted for the better of the institution, that's how it has been worked”. **DHT2**

One PEA in Mulanje observed that SPR processes had empowered headteachers with skills to develop school improvement plans that are being used to prioritise and optimise the use of school funds and resources. He reported that :

“School improvement plans introduced through SPR reforms have been helpful. Headteachers are now able to procure textbooks using funds from the government which is being funded through SIG (School Improvement Grant) based on these plans.” **MPEA 2**

There was an increased level of stakeholder participation in school activities as a result of SPR reform. Headteachers involved in this study reported that community leaders took initiative to mobilise resources to improve the school learning environment. One Headteacher observed that :

“The community can initiate the projects on their own without being forced or told to do those by somebody else b After doing those they can go out to look for donors to support where support is in need. As teachers, we are also able to make things on our own because we keep that thing at our

school as our tradition that this month what should we do, this month with our learners we can plant trees around our school premises that is how the school is all about.” **MHT 1**

The adoption of the SPR processes in schools contributed to the retention of learners thereby One PEA in Mulanje observed that:

“There is a great change because maybe we can say about 70 or 75% of learners are here at school, they go further with their education and very few dropped the school, others may be because of early pregnancies. It's just because the schools put much effort into providing education to learners and those learners themselves see that these teachers want us to learn so that we can make our future a fruitful future so they like school and their parents also influence them to come to school.” **MPEA 2**

The implementation of the SPR processes ushered in some unexpected changes that were not anticipated. One Headteacher explained :

“The programme of Link after training and orientation, through that training and orientation we were empowered. Through those innovations, our learners have made a tremendous improvement in terms of punctuality, class attendance, class performance and even in terms of dressing, when I say dressing I mean school uniform so those are improvements so far” **MHT1**

In some schools, the adaptation of SPR processes reportedly resulted in improved performance among learners and an improved transition rate from primary to secondary schools. One Headteacher observed that :

“Ah what has surprised us is that the performance is improving and the selection of learners from this school to secondary schools which has given us a picture that we are improving as a school and has also made learners like school.

-2021 was our first year to produce the learners to go to secondary schools and about 22 learners were selected. This year, we expect the number to increase because we told the teachers in that standard 8 class to deal with learners effectively so that we can make them pass their PSLC examinations.” **MHT 2**

4.7 What happens when Link work cease to operate

The study sought to find out what happened when Link activities cease to operate in a school. In this study, Link’s work ceased to operate in Mulanje; we engaged PEAs and headteachers to find out whether this had a bearing on the continuation of the practice. Our finding was that there was that stakeholders perceived little effect on the potency of the SPR reform and that impact was sustainable. Below are some extracts from PEAs and headteachers. One PEA recalled that:

“At first we really felt bad because by then I remember I was the Headteacher of certain school which had the partners but we felt like we have been left in suspense however knowledge is really powerful because we are still using the knowledge that Link left behind” **MPEA 1**

He further explained that :

“Schools have really improved and nothing has changed and we have improved for the better because we are still using the knowledge that Link left behind. The activities have been continued in the absence of Link” **MPEA 1**

This view was corroborated by another PEA in the same district who reported that :

“Here, I am talking of a particular school because I was the head of that school that time I was not a PEA thus why my focus will be on that. So after Link left, we were not doing the programs on our own but we were involving the community, even the

learners. Learners are our customers so we included them, for instance, during focus groups discussions, we chose 10 learners and also they came up with their challenges to be prioritised”

MPEA 2

In the above extract, the PEA in question when he was a Headteacher continues with activities which were initiated by Link. He further explained that :

“Yes, we normally have PSIP reviews and when talking of PSIP reviews we meet stakeholders for each and every school; head, deputy, teachers, some chiefs, the school governing bodies, we select a few for instance the executive. We normally preach about transparency and accountability and these schools are prioritising their activities. They are making school improvement plans. So yes Link has gone but activities are still continuing and being implemented” **MPEA 2**

In the above extract the SPR initiatives are still being implemented under the PSIP review processes. The key aspects of SPR have been retained: engagement of stakeholders, prioritisation of schools and the development of school improvement plans.

5 Findings and research questions

The preceding section presented findings thematically in the sequence they emerged from analysis of transcripts from interviews with the informants. The purpose of this section is to examine how and to what extent research findings have addressed the research questions posted at the outset.

5.1 Research Questions focusing on SPR processes in engaged schools

5.1.1 To what extent has School Performance Review (SPR) work been adopted?

Testimonies from Primary Education Advisors (PEAs) strongly suggested SPR had been internalised as *modus operandi* at the district level, with the School Improvement Cycle forming a focal point for the work of district offices, through activities such as data collection and inspection. This is then mirrored at the school level with SPR process forming a locus of

engagement between school leaders and district officials. Whilst our findings suggest teachers are typically not cognisant of the overall mechanism and terminology of the SPR, teachers described improvement planning at the school-level and highlighted such processes and conversations as a way for classroom teachers to highlight challenges and put on the agenda for longer-term resolution.

5.1.2 To what extent have SPR processes produced sustainable changes in school quality?

At all levels, our informants argued that improvements in retention and attainment could be attributed to quality changes at the school level on the back of deploying the school improvement cycle. Moreover, no informant voiced scepticism of the impact of SPR. This is a reassuring finding for everyone involved, but given the nature of the research should not be taken as final proof of impact. Rather, the findings suggest positive impact of SPR is probable. Recall, the study is based on a small purposive sample, so is not representative of schools in Malawi but rather provides illustrative examples. Changes in school quality are based on the subjective judgement of informants and as always with observational data, the counterfactual scenario of no adoption of SPR for the same schools cannot be realised and therefore not observed. Some of the stakeholders may have been motivated to report higher levels of engagement and stronger impact than more objective findings would have revealed. Hence, by definition, we cannot know for sure what would have happened in the absence of the SPR. Perhaps schools would have improved regardless. This could be assessed through more elaborate and detailed comparisons, which were beyond the scope of this study.

Insofar as we can we ascertain positive improvements in school quality have occurred, the available evidence suggests these are sustainable, in the sense that they persist once Link Education International has ceased support for the SPR in a given district (see discussion under 5.2 below).

5.1.3 What is the perceived cost-effectiveness of any changes in school quality?

From a research design perspective, the data collection was the least effective in responding to this question. None of our informants felt they could provide insights into the cost-effectiveness of SPR. Some respondents offered *a priori* arguments about the likely cost-effectiveness of the SPR given the scale of socioeconomic benefits from education. However, nobody professed to have an overview of the costs of SPR or the magnitude of SPR impacts so that cost-effectiveness could be judged. A satisfactory answer to this question is

likely to require a more explicit school-finance research design. However, again, there is no evidence that respondents had any doubts about the cost-effectiveness of the impact.

5.2 Research Questions focusing on schools where Link is no longer active

5.2.1 What happens to the SPR processes when Link's engagement ceases?

In the cases examined, key informants described working with processes analogous to the SPR process although often informants were not able to articulate SPR terminology. This suggests modes of working persist after the formal leadership and support of Link Education International is withdrawn.

5.2.2 Are there any elements of Link's work that are sustained after ceasing engagement?

Two key pathways emerged as plausible reinforcers of SPR work after Link's withdrawal. First, the internalisation of SPR practices by district offices meant that data collection continued. At the school-level improvement planning reportedly continued, possibly as a result of internalised practice and also because of district improvement funds being subject to submission of improvement plans. Second, several informants cited community involvement as a reinforcing mechanism. Once communities had become engaged, they would continue to take interest in local schools. This acted as a reinforcement mechanism for educators and students – as well as a resource for schools who could tap into local communities for material and labour input as well as facilitation with other stakeholders.

6 The emergence of a Community of Practice framework for Malawi

The preceding section examined how and to what extent research findings addressed the research questions posed at the outset. In the process of collaborative discussion of the analysis between researchers and Link staff it became apparent that emerging themes could be grouped to illustrate how communities of practice worked in Malawi. Figure 3 below outlines the emerging themes grouped inside a Venn diagram with three circles, which speak to how SPR (1) aligns with the system, (2) increases stakeholder engagement, and (3) appears to increase the teachers' intrinsic motivation. The ideas in Figure 3 also evidence how some of the collaborations between teachers resonate with the Community of Practice model, coined elsewhere by Lave and Wenger (1991) and subsequently developed by other scholars out with the Global South (e.g. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This model advocates that groups of practitioners working together towards a common purpose can learn from each other, advancing individual and group practice. The model rests on the assumption of voluntary

participation and a relative absence of a formal hierarchy other than the participants' different levels of experience.

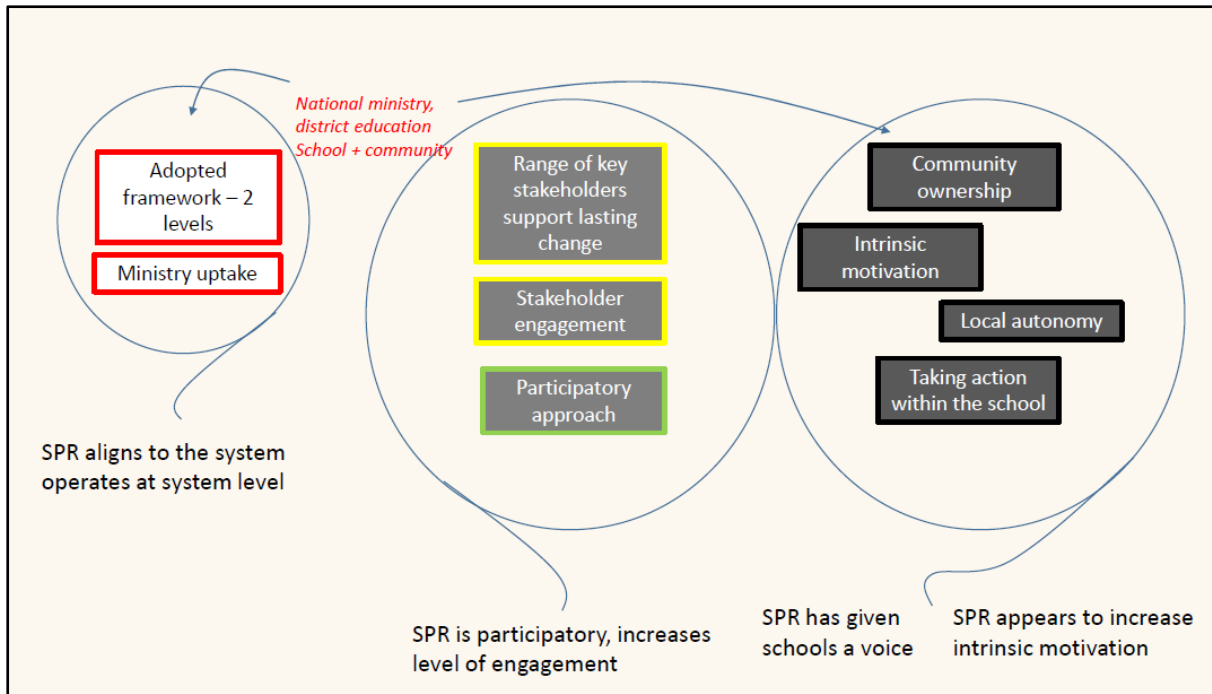


Figure 3. The emerging Community of Practice model in Malawi (developed from Keenan, 2022)

We would argue, nevertheless, that what we found on the ground is unique compared with Wenger’s Community of Practice model, because the emerging model in Malawi had some hierarchies (e.g. PEAs, Headteachers) and the gains for teachers were often material (e.g. a new classroom built with community support). Figure 3 could be the start of a new theoretical framework for Malawi, and in the next section we suggest at least two issues that merit future investigation, namely the need for longitudinal designs and further collaboration with local researchers.

7 Recommendations and avenues for future research

This study has shown that while headteachers were conversant with the demands of the SPR processes, they proceeded to implement the reforms at the school level in isolation from other

schools. This suggests there are opportunities for improvement through facilitating communities of practice where headteachers can learn from one another.

Across the informants, there are indications that SPR awareness is embedded in individuals. A negative aspect of this is that over time awareness may erode with staffing changes. Conversely, there were instances of respondents knowing SPR from experiences in a previous appointment and therefore there is potential for SPR to be transmitted between schools and districts as people disperse across the system. This could be useful to explore in further research.

Similarly, future research may want to consider the spill over effects of SPR from targeted schools to non-targeted schools in the surrounding area. The apparent increase in intrinsic motivation outlined in Figure 3 could be better evidenced with a longitudinal design, to compare levels of motivation before and after SPR engagement. There are hints that the way communities of practice work in the Global South differ from the contexts of scholars in the Global North. In a recent study of teachers' communities of practice in Oman, Al-Sinani (2023) identified mixed attitudes in workplace' collegiality, overwhelming workloads, and the range of duties demanded in such communities as challenges for their implementation. Further collaborative studies co-led with local researchers would be required to critically consider how frameworks developed elsewhere are operationalised in the Global South.

8 Conclusion

Through the use of qualitative research methods, analysing data collected in Dedza and Mulanje districts in May 2022, we have evaluated how School Performance Review (SPR) has worked in schools in rural Malawi – both those engaged in the SPR and those that had been supported in the past. Testimonies were sought through structured interviews with 6 district officials (Primary Education Advisors - PEAs) and 6 head teachers. Similarly, 6 focus groups were conducted with 2 to 5 participating teachers in each. Through these tools, we sought to determine the level of awareness of SPR, extent of SPR adoption and sustainability of the reforms, the outcomes associated with the adoption of SPR and how reform fared where Link had ceased to operate.

In general, we saw clear evidence that SPR had been adopted in schools – although awareness of the SPR varied between types of informants. Outlined below are specific conclusions of the study:

- PEAs were typically well aware of SPR and fluent in its vocabulary and concepts. Headteachers were typically less aware of the ideas behind SPR but had engaged with the process. Teachers were typically not familiar with the terminology of SPR but described school review activities.
- The testimonies of our informants indicate that SPR had produced changes in school quality, both as gauged by internal processes as well as by learning outcomes. We found little awareness of the cost-effectiveness of the process and are not able to evaluate it based on the reports of our informants.
- Focusing on schools where Link is no longer engaging in SPR activities, we found they continued to practise in accordance with SPR ideas. Whilst memory of Link's involvement as such largely faded at the School level, teachers and head teachers described active school review practices. At the district level, there was awareness of Link's historical involvement and explicit reference to district officials having internalised SPR approaches. A possible enabling factor cited by respondents was the extensive community engagement inherent in the SPR, which had created a culture of engaged stakeholders with raised expectations towards schools and educators. Other respondents indicated that school review had become a vehicle for teachers to raise systemic challenges in their schools and also for schools to seek improvement funding from their district.

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Appendix 1 – Indicative Interview and Focus Group Schedules

INDICATIVE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR MINISTRY OR DISTRICT OFFICIALS AND PRIMARY EDUCATION ADVISORS

1. To what extent has School Review work been adopted?

- a. Tell us a bit about the story of the Ministry/District's engagement with Link's School Review process (ask follow-up questions to deepen response, e.g. what's your understanding of how this process works?)
- b. What does the Ministry/District do with Link as part of School Review? How are you involved?
- c. What happens between cycles of school review - every 3 years - how well do schools manage School Review steps on their own?
- d. Are you aware of School Review processes becoming part of the schools' normal processes?
- e. What happens when key people responsible for School Review move around – do they take knowledge with them/transfer it to other staff members? If not, what are the barriers?
- f. Is the Ministry/District engaging with education programs from other agencies? If yes, which ones? For how long? Are programs complementing each other? (be observant of external prompts and ask about them)

2. To what extent have School Review processes produced sustainable changes in school quality?

- a. Are you aware of School Review/Link work producing sustainable changes in the quality of schools?
- b. What is the main positive change you have seen resulting from the Ministry/District's engagement with Link's School Review? Why do you think this happened?
- c. Are there other positive outcomes? And any unexpected changes, including not so positive?
- d. In your view, are there any groups of individuals currently missing from the School Review process? (If yes, why are they not included?)

3. What is the perceived cost-effectiveness of any changes in school quality?

- a. Has School Review changed the effectiveness of schools? If yes, in what way?
- b. What factors have facilitated the work with Link? e.g. personal, financial, etc.
- c. What factors have hindered this type of work?
- d. Do you have an overview of what resources have been devoted to the School Review process at the Ministry/District and school-level?
- e. Thinking of costs and effectiveness, would you say the School Review process offers better or worse value for money than most projects?
- f. If you could change one thing to improve the Ministry/District's engagement with Link what would it be? (follow up question if they refer to the Ministry/District instead of Link, e.g. But if you could change one thing in School Review to enhance its cost-effectiveness what would it be?)

4. What happens to the School Review processes when Link's engagement ceases?

- a. Have school improvements continued, stayed the same, or 'backslid'?
- b. Can the tasks (outputs) and desired effects (outcomes) of SR be sustained without inputs from Link? If yes, how?
- c. If the Ministry/District and its schools cannot sustain the School Review cycle on their own, how wide is the 'resource gap', what would be required to do this?

5. Are there any elements of the School Review work that are sustained after ceasing engagement with Link?

- a. If yes, which one(s) and why?
- b. What is their value and relevance to the schools that have continued them?
- c. Are there ways that information presented during the School Review process could be made more relevant and useful to Ministry/District officials and/or schools?
- d. Is there anything you would like to add that I may have missed in my questions?

INDICATIVE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR HEAD TEACHERS
(Q4 & Q5 only for schools in which Link is no longer active)

1. To what extent has School Review (SR) work been adopted?

- a. Tell us a bit about the training or orientations by Link? (follow-up questions to deepen response, e.g. how has the school implemented the training on School Review? What did the school learn? What's your understanding of how this process works? What's the story of your School's engagement with Link?)
- b. What does the School do as part of School Review? How are you involved?
- c. What happens between cycles of SR - every 3 years - how well do schools manage SR steps on their own?
- d. What aspects of School Review have you adopted in the school?
- e. What happens when key people responsible for School Review move around – do they take knowledge with them/transfer it to other staff members? If not, what are the barriers?
- f. Is your School engaging with education programs from other agencies? If yes, which ones? For how long? Are programs complementing each other? (interviewer to be observant of external prompts and ask about them)

2. To what extent have School Review processes produced sustainable changes in school quality?

- a. Are you aware of School Review/Link work producing sustainable changes in the quality of your school?
- b. What is the main positive change you have seen resulting from your School's engagement with School Review? Why do you think this happened?
- c. Are there other positive outcomes? And any unexpected changes, including not so positive?
- d. In your view, are there any groups of individuals currently missing from the SR process? (If yes, why are they not included?)

3. What is the perceived cost-effectiveness of any changes in school quality?

- a. Has SR changed the effectiveness of your School? If yes, in what way?
- b. What factors have facilitated the work with the School Review process? e.g. personal, financial, etc.
- c. What factors have hindered this type of work?
- d. Do you have an overview of what resources have been devoted to the SR process at the School level? (And at the District level?)
- e. Thinking of costs and effectiveness, would you say the School Review process offers better or worse value for money than most projects?
- f. If you could change one thing to improve your School's engagement with the School Review process what would it be? (follow up question if they refer to their School instead of Link's School Review process, e.g. But if you could change one thing in School Review to enhance its cost-effectiveness what would it be?)

4. What happened to the School Review processes when the School's engagement with Link ceased?

- a. Have school improvements continued, stayed the same, or 'backslid'?
- b. Can the tasks and desired effects of School Review be sustained without inputs from 'School Review facilitators' [*adjust depending on how facilitators are called locally*]? If yes, how?
- c. If the School cannot sustain the School Review cycle on their own, how wide is the 'resource gap', what would be required to do this?

5. Are there any elements of the SR work that are sustained after ceasing engagement with Link?

- a. If yes, which one(s) and why? What is their value and relevance to the School?
- b. Are there ways that information presented during the School Review process could be made more relevant and useful to Schools?
- c. Is there anything you would like to add that I may have missed in my questions?

INDICATIVE FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE FOR TEACHERS
(Q4 & Q5 only for schools in which Link is no longer active)

1. To what extent has School Review work been adopted?

- a. Tell us a bit about the story of your engagement as a teacher with the SR process (follow-up questions as required in order to deepen response, e.g. what's your understanding of how this process works?)
- b. What does the School do as part of School Review? How are you involved?
- c. What happens between cycles of SR - every 3 years - how well do teachers manage SR steps on their own?
- d. Are you aware of School Review processes becoming part of the teachers' normal work processes?
- e. What happens when key people responsible for School Review move around – do they take knowledge with them/transfer it to other staff members? If not, what are the barriers?
- f. Is your School and/or yourself engaging with education programs from other agencies? If yes, which ones? For how long? Are programs complementing each other? (interviewer to be observant of any external prompts and ask about them, if relevant)

2. To what extent have School Review processes produced sustainable changes in students' learning quality?

- a. Are you aware of School Review work producing sustainable changes in the quality of the students' learning?
- b. What is the main positive change you have seen resulting from your School's and your own engagement with School Review? Why do you think this happened?
- c. Are there other positive outcomes? And any unexpected changes, including not so positive changes or outcomes?
- d. In your view, are there any groups of individuals currently missing from the School Review process? (If yes, why are they not included?)

3. What is the perceived cost-effectiveness of any changes in school quality?

- a. Has School Review changed the effectiveness of your School? If yes, in what way?
- b. What factors have facilitated the work with the School Review process? e.g. personal, financial, etc.
- c. What factors have hindered this type of work?
- d. Do you have an overview of what resources have been devoted to the School Review process at the teachers' level? And at the School level?
- e. If you could change one thing to improve your School's engagement with the School Review process what would it be? (follow up question if they refer to their School instead of Link's School Review process, e.g. But if you could change one thing in School Review to enhance its cost-effectiveness what would it be?)

4. What happened to the School Review processes when the School's engagement with Link ceased?

- a. Have school improvements continued, stayed the same, or 'backslid'?
- b. Can the tasks and desired effects of School Review be sustained without inputs from 'School Review facilitators' [*adjust depending on how facilitators are called locally*]? If yes, how?
- c. If the teachers cannot sustain the School Review cycle on their own, how wide is the 'resource gap', what would be required to do this?

5. Are there any elements of the School Review work that are sustained after ceasing engagement with Link?

- a. If yes, which one(s) and why? What is their value and relevance to you? And to the School?
- b. Are there ways that information presented during the School Review process could be made more relevant and useful to teachers?
- c. Is there anything you would like to add that I may have missed in my questions?

Appendix 2 – example of a blank Consent Form



University
of Glasgow
College of Social
Sciences

Consent Form for Interviews

Title of Project: *The long-term impact of School Performance Review (SPR) in engaged schools and residual impact in past schools in Malawi*

Name of Researcher: Dr Kristinn Hermannsson (Principal Investigator), University of Glasgow, UK

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I consent / do not consent (delete as applicable) to the interview being audio-recorded.

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.

- All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised. Please note that although the team aims at maintaining confidentiality in the final report, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed as the education offices or schools might be identified by a knowledgeable reader tracking their work with the funder (Link Community Development). Confidentiality will be maintained unless the interviewers hear anything which makes them worried that someone might be in danger of harm, in which case they might have to inform relevant agencies of this.
- The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- The anonymised material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research
- The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.
- I agree to waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.

I agree to take part in this research study

Name of Participant Signature

Date

Name of Researcher Signature

Date

Appendix 3 – example of Participant Information Sheet



University
of Glasgow

College of Social
Sciences

Participant Information Sheet for Interviews

Research title: *The long-term impact of School Performance Review (SPR) in engaged schools and residual impact in past schools in Malawi*

Researcher: Dr K. Hermannsson, University of Glasgow, UK (Principal Investigator)

Introduction

You are being invited to an individual interview for a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Background information on Link's School Performance Review

Link Community Development (an NGO with headquarters in Edinburgh, UK) has for a number of years operated a school improvement initiative called "School Performance Review (SPR)" in Malawi. SPR works with government education officials and school leaders in each country to strengthen quality of education through improved governance and monitoring of quality indicators. The organisation recognises that previous evaluations of this work were driven by evaluation protocols of external funders and didn't necessarily provide the organisation with the information it needed to make decisions about the future development and orientation of the SPR programme. Therefore, it approached researchers at the University of Glasgow to commission an evaluation of this work to address specific questions the organisation had identified about the long term impact of this work on participating schools and what legacy the SPR work leaves behind once Link withdraws from schools. The primary data collection proposed in this application follows on from a series of meetings with Link Community development to define the priorities of the project and a document-based scoping study carried out by the same research team in 2019 (for further information please see: Hermannsson, K., Read, B., & Odena, O. (2019) *Link Community Development Interventions in Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Uganda, and Rwanda: Review of Evidence 2008-2018. Project Report*. School of Education, University of Glasgow. Available at <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/192774/>)

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to gather testimonies from school leaders that work with the SPR process currently and those who have done so in the past – as well as key informants in the education system of Malawi, in particularly school district officials and officials in the ministries of education in Lilongwe. These testimonies in conjunction with secondary data sources will be used to address the following questions:

Research questions focussing on SPR processes in engaged schools:

1. To what extent has SPR work been adopted?
2. To what extent have SPR processes produced sustainable changes in school quality?
3. What is the perceived cost-effectiveness of any changes in school quality?

Research questions focussing on schools where Link is no longer active:

4. What happens to the SPR processes when Link's engagement ceases?
5. Are there any elements of Link's work that are sustained after ceasing engagement?

Timeline and time commitment

Data collection will be carried online and on the ground (if travel restrictions allow) from April 2021 to April 2022. If restrictions are not lifted fieldwork will be entirely online. Individual interviews will last approximately 40 minutes.

Our commitment to you and to confidentiality during the research process

You do not have to answer any questions that you don't want to. Interviews will be audio recorded so that afterwards the researchers can listen carefully to what you said.

All the information will be kept in a locked cabinet and a locked file on the researchers' laptop. Your personal details will be kept confidential, your name will not be mentioned in any report. We will describe you with a pseudonym with no personal information (unless you wish to waive confidentiality). All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised. Please note that although the team aims at maintaining confidentiality in any reports, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed as the offices or schools might be identified by a knowledgeable reader tracking their work with SPR.

The data collected, once anonymised, will be used for a final report to funders and re-used for future publications. The audio recordings will be destroyed by the end date of the research project (01/04/2022). Anonymised research data (transcripts) will be made available to other researchers. Finally, confidentiality will be maintained unless the interviewers hear anything which makes them worried that someone might be in danger of harm, in which case they might have to inform relevant agencies of this.

Thank you for your participation. This project has been approved by the College Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow.

If you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me, Dr Kristinn Hermansson

Or the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, [REDACTED]

_____ End of Participant Information Sheet _____