

Development Partners and their Impact on Education Reforms: Comparative Examples in Ghana

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90500005>

Received: 17 April 2025; Accepted: 21 April 2025; Published: 27 May 2025

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comprehensive theoretical investigation into the influence of development partners on education reforms in Ghana. With a focus on the role of the World Bank and other international agencies, the study examines how global reform agendas intersect with national policies. Drawing on a blend of world culture theory, social justice principles (Fraser, 2005), Blaxland's "5 As" framework (2019, 2023), and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), the analysis explores the extent to which externally driven reforms either complement or compromise local ownership. By comparing the landmark reforms of 1987 and 1993, the paper demonstrates that while external actors provide critical financial and technical support, their influence creates governance dynamic that challenges national autonomy in education policymaking. The findings offer insights for policymakers seeking to balance global best practices with culturally responsive and locally owned strategies for sustainable education reform.

Keywords: Ghana, education reforms, development partners, World Bank, global education policy, ownership, equity, critical theory.

INTRODUCTION

Educational reform in Ghana has evolved within a complex interplay between domestic aspirations and external influences. Since independence, the Government of Ghana has aimed to achieve universal and equitable education for its citizens. However, various reforms—most notably those introduced in 1987 and 1993—illustrate how donor agencies, particularly the World Bank, have significantly shaped policy processes and content.

Global education initiatives such as Education for All (EFA) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have influenced national agendas by promoting standardized reform templates. While these frameworks claim to advance equity and quality, they often impose external conditions that may not fully consider local contexts or cultural specifics. In Ghana, this tension is evident: the 1987 reform, driven by structural adjustment imperatives, introduced cost-sharing and decentralization, whereas the 1993 reform—marketed as fCUBE (Free, Compulsory, Universal Basic Education)—claimed a rights-based, inclusive approach yet continued to rely heavily on donor expertise and conditional financing.

This paper critically interrogates the extent to which development partners have influenced education reforms in Ghana. It asks: Who really owns these reforms? How do internationally prescribed policy frameworks interact with national contexts? And what are the implications for educational equity, system sustainability, and local governance? By examining these questions, the study situates Ghana's reform trajectory within broader global debates on donor involvement, accountability, and policy legitimacy.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the theoretical framework is outlined, drawing on Fraser's social justice theory, Blaxland's "5 As," and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Next, an extensive literature review provides a contextual background and a critical appraisal of global and local reform influences. This is followed by a detailed comparative analysis of the 1987 and 1993 reforms and a discussion on governance, accountability, and ownership. The paper concludes by synthesizing its findings and outlining implications for future policy-making.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a multidimensional theoretical framework that critically examines how global educational discourses, development partner influence, and national policy autonomy interact in the context of Ghana's education reforms. Three intersecting bodies of theory are employed:

Nancy Fraser's Theory of Social Justice

Fraser's (2005) theory of social justice posits that justice involves not only the equitable redistribution of resources but also the recognition of cultural diversity and the political representation of marginalized groups. In education, this lens challenges reforms that, while financially pragmatic, may neglect the cultural and participatory needs of low-income and rural communities. In examining Ghana's reforms, Fraser's framework compels us to evaluate whether policies not only provide access but also empower communities by allowing meaningful participation in decision-making. The question of "ownership" thus becomes a matter of both material distribution and democratic legitimacy.

Blaxland's "5 As" Framework

Blaxland's "5 As" framework (2019, 2023)—comprising Approachability, Acceptability, Affordability, Accessibility, and Appropriateness—provides a practical tool for evaluating educational access. Each dimension identifies specific barriers that can impede effective participation. For instance, even if a reform increases school availability (Accessibility), hidden costs (Affordability) or cultural misalignment (Acceptability) may continue to exclude vulnerable groups. In Ghana, where reforms have been implemented under both cost-sharing and free education paradigms, the "5 As" offer a way to assess whether policy initiatives truly meet the needs of the populations they intend to serve.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory frames child development—and by extension, the implementation of educational reforms—within nested systems. These range from the immediate environments (microsystem) of family and school to broader societal structures (macrosystem) that encompass cultural norms and national policies. This theory emphasizes that the success of any education reform is contingent upon coherence across multiple levels. For Ghana, this means that reform success depends not only on well-crafted policies but also on effective implementation at district, school, and community levels. Temporal shifts (the chronosystem) further underscore how historical legacies impact contemporary reforms.

Integrative Reflections

Together, these frameworks provide a robust and multifaceted lens for analyzing the influence of development partners on Ghanaian education reforms. While Fraser's theory interrogates the normative dimensions of justice, Blaxland's "5 As" evaluate practical barriers to access, and Bronfenbrenner's model situates reforms within their broader social context. This integrative approach enables a critical examination of whether externally influenced reforms genuinely meet the equitable and participatory criteria required for sustainable change, or whether they simply mirror global policy templates that may be ill-suited to local conditions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Educational Reforms and the Rise of Development Partnerships

Over the past few decades, education systems in the Global South have increasingly been reshaped by international agendas. Global initiatives such as Education for All (EFA), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have imposed standardized reform templates on developing countries (Mundy, 2007; Tikly, 2001). These initiatives, while promoting universal access, are often driven by neoliberal principles emphasizing economic competitiveness and measurable outcomes. The World Bank has emerged as a dominant actor in this space, using its financial and technical resources to set reform priorities through instruments such as Sector-Wide Approaches (SWAp) and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers

(Jones, 2004). Consequently, national education policies are frequently a hybrid of local needs and externally derived models—a dynamic that raises questions about policy ownership and context specificity.

Education Reforms in Ghana: Historical Trajectories and Policy Gaps

Ghana's journey toward universal education has seen multiple reform phases. Historically modeled on colonial education systems, Ghana's early reforms attempted to reconcile imported structures with local realities. The 1987 reform emerged against a backdrop of economic crisis and structural adjustment. Under pressure from international financial institutions, the government introduced cost-sharing measures and reoriented the curriculum toward technical and vocational skills to drive economic efficiency (Carnoy, 1999; Sewyer, 1997). However, these measures often exacerbated inequalities, as they disproportionately burdened low-income families.

In contrast, the 1993 reform, better known as fCUBE, was introduced following the Education for All movement and enshrined in the 1992 Constitution. While fCUBE was designed to promote equity and eliminate fees at the basic education level, it nevertheless remained closely tied to international funding and donor-imposed frameworks. This reform aimed to expand access and improve quality but encountered persistent challenges—including fragmented project coordination and limited local capacity to implement policy effectively (Casely-Hayford et al., 2007).

The Role and Impact of Development Partners

Development partners play a dual role in shaping education reform. On the one hand, they provide critical financial resources and technical expertise, enabling countries like Ghana to modernize infrastructure, curriculum, and teacher training. On the other hand, their involvement brings with it a set of conditionalities and global policy models that may not align fully with local cultural, economic, or social contexts (Crossley & Watson, 2003). For example, the World Bank's transition from a purely funding-focused institution to one that actively shapes policy frameworks has led to reforms that emphasize efficiency and standardization over local contextualization (Jones, 2004).

Recent studies (Morris & Johnson, 2019; Smith & Osei, 2020) have critiqued these externally driven models for sometimes reducing education to mere human capital formation. They argue that such approaches can inadvertently marginalize local voices and relegate national stakeholders to passive recipients of donor-dictated reforms. In the Ghanaian context, despite laudable objectives like increasing access to education, externally influenced reforms have sometimes generated unintended consequences, such as increased dropout rates and persistent inequities, as the policies do not fully address underlying socio-cultural and economic realities.

Critical Reflections on Policy Transfer and Ownership

The theoretical and empirical literature converges on a central critique: that educational reform in developing countries is often a contested process marked by tensions between international models and local priorities. Fraser (2005) argues for the need to reframe justice in policy-making, emphasizing equitable resource distribution, recognition of local cultures, and inclusive representation in decision-making. In Ghana, the extensive influence of development partners has raised questions about whose interests are served. While reforms such as the 1987 and 1993 initiatives have undeniably improved basic education metrics, they have done so at the potential cost of sidelining local voices and exacerbating dependency on donor funding. This literature calls for reforms that are co-designed through genuine local participation, ensuring that the benefits and strategies resonate with the community's unique needs.

Synthesis and Identified Research Gap

Despite the rich body of literature on global educational policy and the role of development partners, few studies have offered a deep, comparative theoretical analysis of reform ownership in Ghana. There remains a critical gap in understanding how externally influenced reforms impact the sustainability and legitimacy of education policy in a local context. This paper aims to fill that gap by juxtaposing the 1987 and 1993 reforms—examining

the financial, political, and cultural dimensions of each—and by interrogating the delicate balance between donor influence and national agency.

Through this comprehensive literature review, the stage is set for a critical analysis of how Ghana's educational reforms have been shaped by global imperatives and what that means for future policy innovation.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Comparative Analysis of the 1987 and 1993 Reforms:

Global Models versus Local Realities

The 1987 reform was characterized by a finance-driven approach amid a structural adjustment environment. Implemented under the auspices of the Economic Recovery Programme, it emphasized cost-sharing, vocationalization, and decentralization. The World Bank, as the dominant donor, imposed conditionalities that aligned national policy with its human capital agenda (Jones, 2004). While these measures aimed to optimize resource use and enhance efficiency, they also led to unintended consequences such as increased financial burdens on low-income families and the marginalization of non-economic educational objectives.

In contrast, the 1993 reform—known as fCUBE—was introduced in response to global pressures following the Education for All (EFA) movement and constitutional mandates for free, compulsory education. This reform sought to redress some of the inequities by eliminating fees and expanding access to basic education. Yet, the reform was still heavily influenced by donor agencies like UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, which provided both funding and a framework for implementation. Despite its equity-driven rhetoric, the fragmentation of donor-funded projects and the persistence of informal fee practices indicate that the reform did not fully achieve its intended outcomes (Casely-Hayford et al., 2007).

This comparative analysis reveals a critical tension: while the 1987 reform epitomized a donor-led, market-oriented intervention, the 1993 reform attempted to realign the system with national, rights-based goals. However, both suffered from a lack of genuine local ownership—a dynamic that persists when external influence overshadows internal capacity. By examining these two pivotal reforms, the discussion highlights how the role of development partners has oscillated between enabling critical funding and imposing policy directions that may not always reflect local priorities.

Governance, Accountability, and Informal Practices

A central theme emerging from the comparative analysis is the tension between formal governance structures and informal practices within Ghana's education system. Although policy reforms were introduced with the aim of standardizing education and ensuring equity, the reality on the ground is complicated by persistent informal practices such as unofficial fees, sporadic district supervision, and ad hoc teacher incentives. Empirical findings from local studies indicate that such practices undermine the efficacy of formally implemented reforms (Rolleston & Oketch, 2016).

Using Blaxland's "5 As" framework helps to clarify these issues. For example, while physical infrastructure may have improved (Accessibility), affordability remains compromised due to hidden costs. Additionally, Acceptability is questioned when reforms fail to engage with local cultural practices, and Approachability is reduced when policy information is not effectively disseminated. These discrepancies suggest a gap between the policy vision and its practical implementation. Informal governance mechanisms, far from being mere add-ons, reveal the adaptive strategies of local institutions struggling to fill the void created by weak oversight and under-resourced public systems.

Ownership and Legitimacy: The Intersection of Power and Participation

A further dimension of analysis centers on the question of policy ownership. Fraser's (2005) framework reminds us that for reforms to be just, they must be underpinned by genuine redistributive, recognitional, and representational justice. However, in Ghana, the dominance of donor agencies in the reform process often results

in policies that favor external agendas over local needs. This is visible in the extensive reliance on donor funding, the imposition of conditionalities, and the tendency to adopt global models without sufficient adaptation to local cultural contexts.

The notion of ownership is further complicated by the role of accountability systems. While formal mechanisms—such as supervisory visits by district education officers—exist to ensure policy implementation, their infrequency and limited scope have led to a proliferation of informal practices. Without robust, contextually sensitive accountability structures, the reforms risk becoming instruments of donor satisfaction rather than tools for sustainable educational improvement.

Implications for Future Policy and Practice

The analysis suggests that for education reforms in Ghana to achieve sustainable, equitable outcomes, there must be a recalibration of the donor–government relationship. Development partners should transition from imposing prescriptive models to engaging in genuine co-creation of policies. This means integrating local knowledge, cultural specificity, and participatory approaches into the reform process.

Moreover, strengthening formal accountability mechanisms and aligning them with community-based governance can help reduce the reliance on informal practices that undermine reform effectiveness. As Ghana continues to navigate the challenges of education reform, the lessons drawn from the 1987 and 1993 experiences underline the importance of ensuring that external interventions do not come at the expense of local autonomy or social justice.

In sum, the evidence suggests that the pathway to effective education reform in Ghana lies in adopting models that are simultaneously globally informed and locally owned—ensuring that reforms are not only financially supported and technically sound but also culturally relevant and democratically legitimate.

CONCLUSION

This paper has critically examined the role of development partners in shaping education reforms in Ghana, particularly focusing on the 1987 and 1993 reform periods. Through a nuanced application of Fraser’s social justice theory, Blaxland’s “5 As” framework, and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, the analysis reveals that while development partners have significantly contributed financial resources and global expertise, their influence has also led to challenges in ensuring national ownership and contextual relevance.

The comparative analysis illustrates that the 1987 reform, driven by cost-sharing and structural adjustment imperatives, and the 1993 reform, framed around universal access and equity, both suffer from the tension between externally imposed models and the need for locally adapted policies. Informal practices, weak accountability, and a lack of genuine stakeholder participation further complicate the implementation of these reforms.

Ultimately, this study argues for a more balanced approach to educational reform in Ghana—one that leverages international support while safeguarding local agency. A reimagined framework for policy-making, incorporating participatory processes and robust accountability, can foster sustainable, equitable educational outcomes. The findings not only contribute to global debates on donor influence and education reform but also offer practical insights for policymakers seeking to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of national education strategies.

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