

Moving teachers to Malawi's remote communities: A data-driven approach to teacher deployment

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DESCRIPTION OF CRISIS-SPECIFIC CHALLENGE

Extreme variations in staffing between schools in urban areas and those in remote areas are common in sub-Saharan Africa. This leaves schools in remote areas, including many serving refugee and IDP populations, facing severe and chronic shortages of teachers and other education personnel, a key contributor to Africa's learning crisis.

Malawi is an extreme example: Malawi spends more than 80% of its basic education budget on teacher salaries, but its 61,000 primary school teachers are very unevenly distributed between schools. Within a single district, school pupil-teacher ratios (PTRs) can vary from below 10 students per teacher to above 1,000 in extreme cases. Remote schools also typically have fewer facilities and poorer students, and these staffing gaps exacerbate existing inequities in the system.

Nathenje zone, near the capital city of Lilongwe, demonstrates how PTRs can vary enormously within a small area. Nsanjiko primary is based in a small village, 10km up a dirt road from Nathenje town. The village boasts a handful of small shops, but lacks electricity, piped water, or health facilities. Two of the school's teachers live on site; the remainder travel to school on foot or by bicycle either from Nathenje or along a back road from Lilongwe itself.

The school has contended with understaffing since 2013, when four female teachers were allowed to transfer away after experiencing crime while cycling to the school from Lilongwe. The headteacher granted permission for the four to leave on the condition that they be replaced, but no replacements were made available. Since then, new teachers have arrived but others have left owing to marriage or medical issues. The school's PTR is 94, well above the Malawi average of 68.

"Our environment at this school doesn't meet the requirements of some teachers, particularly female teachers," says the headteacher, Dickson Kachamba. "Teachers arrive at Nathenje and see the conditions here, and immediately start to try to transfer to the schools in the trading center. Recently one came and was here for only a week before transferring to a nearby school to be near his wife." By contrast, at Mwatibu school, on the outskirts of Nathenje village, the PTR is just 34.

BRIEF OVERVIEW

Until recently, data on the whereabouts of teachers was fragmented and inconsistent between government agencies. As a result, teacher allocation policies have been broad, malleable, and inconsistently enforced. All schools with a PTR above 60 – three in four schools – have been eligible to receive new staff each year, so teachers are not effectively targeted to the neediest schools. A hardship allowance scheme, intended to reward a minority of teachers working in remote schools, is received by more than 80% of teachers, rendering it ineffective as an incentive. While schools in remote areas struggle with a lack of teachers, those with a legitimate need to work closer to urban areas – for example, those with medical conditions requiring regular treatment – do not always succeed in obtaining transfers. One teacher transferred schools three times, attempting to obtain a less remote position, before arriving at Nsanjiko ten years ago.

"I have asthma. I want to be near the hospital," he says. "The last two times I transferred I provided a medical certificate. I said I wanted to be in town but they said that at Nsanjiko there is understaffing, and if I came here, maybe they could help me in a few years. But I'm still here. I don't know why they are ignoring my views; others have left for town after working here for two-three years, but not me."

Working with central- and district-level officials, a team at the World Bank developed the first up-to-date, accurate, and comprehensive database of all Malawi's primary school teachers and their current school postings. They then identified and analyzed the driving factors behind PTR variation. The analysis confirmed that the aspects of remoteness identified by teachers as key sources of hardship in remote postings are highly predictive of PTR variation. These were the distance of the school from the nearest trading center (meaning a village or settlement with commercial businesses, but not necessarily the district center); but also the availability of basic amenities at the school, such as electricity and a road that is accessible even during the rainy season; and the availability of particular facilities at the trading center, such as a bank, hospital or clinic, and piped water and electricity. The fact that PTR varies according to these factors provided evidence that teachers are able to exercise considerable influence over placements, meaning that staff shortages are most severe where teachers do not want to be placed.

Through focus group discussions and political economy network mapping, the team identified the channels through which teachers exercise this influence. District Education Managers (DEMs), Headteachers, village chiefs, and other stakeholders contributed to the discussions, developing a picture of how teachers apply pressure through formal and informal channels to avoid being placed in remote schools. Officials struggle to adopt a firm line in the face of this pressure, particularly when well-connected teachers convince a political figure or high-ranking official to intervene on their behalf. "People want their friends to be at a school they feel is not remote," said one DEM. "You have to be strong and be prepared to create enemies."

Using these findings, the team developed a new three-level A-C classification of school remoteness, capturing not only physical location but also school-level and trading center facilities. It provides a simple and accurate categorization that captures the key factors that influence teachers to lobby for or resist placement in schools. Using this new, more nuanced categorization, the team developed two policy reforms designed to rapidly reduce disparities in teacher numbers without any additional costs. First, the annual deployment of 5,000 new teachers is now being targeted to Category A and B schools, those deemed the most remote. This method should prove much more effective than

the previous policy in allocating new teachers to the neediest schools.

Second, reforms are underway to the hardship allowance scheme to achieve the original goal of providing a meaningful bonus to teachers working in the most remote schools. The improved scheme will provide a monthly allowance of \$35.00 (equivalent to roughly one-third of an average teacher's salary), targeted to the 20% of teachers who work in the most remote schools, with a reduced amount for teachers in moderately remote schools. This is expected to lessen the pressure from teachers to avoid remote postings, and to incentivize them to stay in or move to hardship schools. The new policy is expected to be rolled out in 2020.

EVIDENCE AND OUTCOMES

The new categorization was introduced for the first time in 2017 to guide the deployment to schools of 4,570 new teachers. DEMs were instructed to prioritize schools in the 'most remote' and 'remote' categories over those in the 'not remote' category. A series of regional-level workshops introduced district officials to the new categorization and the rationale for the change. Many district officials were very successful in allocating almost all their teachers to remote schools. Nationwide, 76% of the new teachers were allocated to schools which were in either the 'remote' or 'most remote' categories. 42% were sent to the most remote category of schools, an important step in rebalancing the distribution of teachers towards these most needy schools.

Improved targeting of teachers is now becoming a central aspect of Malawi's teacher management system. In 2018, a further 7,000 new teachers were deployed to schools. Almost half (49%) of these teachers were deployed to schools with more than 100 pupils per teacher, a huge improvement in the ability of the system to target teachers to the schools with the greatest need.

Moreover, the dialogue around evidence-based policymaking in Malawi is moving from reliance on simplistic 'headline figures' to one based on credible, detailed and reliable data. Malawi is piloting high-frequency, tablet-based collection of data on key school indicators, and conducting a large-scale, nationally

representative longitudinal schools survey collecting a wide range of data on conditions, practices, and outcomes in Malawi's primary schools. These new forms of data will support the government in creating additional rules-based frameworks for decision-making, and equip the government to measure the impact of reforms and projects.

LIMITATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND/OR LESSONS LEARNED

Despite the success of the effort to improve initial allocations of teachers to schools, embedding the second aspect of the planned reforms – improved hardship allowances for teachers in remote postings – has proven more difficult than expected. In order for the planned reform to be revenue neutral, it is required to retract the allowance from teachers who currently receive it despite being in non-remote schools. However, this has proven politically unpalatable, leading to delays in implementation of the planned reforms. At present, the task team is investigating potential sources of development partner finance to support the introduction of the revised allowance scheme as an additional allowance without requiring the removal of the existing, low-value allowance from current recipients. This is expected to be resolved allowing the allowance to be introduced during 2020.
