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## **ENGAGING THE MIDDLE:**

Using research to support progress on gender, education and poverty reduction initiatives in Kenya and South Africa\*

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## ABSTRACT

This chapter reflects on the ESRC/DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Project Gender, Education and Global Policy Reduction Initiatives (GEGPRI), drawing out how the research process catalysed impact among groups who engaged with policy in what we have termed the middle space that lies between centres of global or national-level policy formulations and sites of enactment. The GEGPRI research revealed some of the challenging conditions that might limit the impact of reform initiatives. Many of the people working in the middle space – bureaucrats, NGO workers and school governing bodies in Kenya and South Africa – felt disconnected from the global goals on education and gender equality associated with the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All. For these participants, opportunities for developing deeper understanding of forms of inequality and how these may be challenged were limited. The chapter explores how a quasi-action research methodology allowed the project to open up new spaces for critical discussion of gender, poverty and inequality. In discussing the different research contexts, it reflects on some of the challenges of developing impact through the co-production of knowledge. In doing so it draws out how negotiations over meaning and researcher positionality are an important thread in understanding approaches to impact.

## KEYWORDS

gender equality, education, poverty, action research, MDGs, policy enactment, impact.

## BIOGRAPHIES

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The debate about defining what research impact is, who research users are and how to approach them has been linked with concerns in the social sciences about accountability for the use of public funds; however, this has generated a wider debate about research and the co-production of knowledge, where and how to look for impacts and how the relationships of dialogue and engagement are different across particular fields of enquiry (Bannister and Hardill 2016). Although international development research on gender and education has long had a concern with practice, and the dialogue with practice has been a long-running thread in nationally located work on education, the connection between research, policy and practice is not a simple one with well-maintained processes of dialogue, shared languages or established ways of listening across different communities (Moss 2016; Unterhalter 2015; Whitty 2006). This chapter reflects on the experiences of the Gender, Education and Global Poverty Reduction Initiatives (GEGPRI) research project that set out to develop and document a process of co-production of knowledge with a range of professionals located in terrains of what we have termed a middle space (see Unterhalter and North, forthcoming), situated between the formulation of policy and its realisation as practice. We discuss the project's experiences of engaging stakeholders through a process of quasi-action research and consider how the possibilities for engaging in dialogue across boundaries, as well as differences regarding how the meanings of key terms and ideas were contested in the process of the co-production of knowledge, were significant factors in shaping impact.

The GEGPRI project was concerned with examining initiatives that engage with global aspirations to advance gender equality in and through schooling in contexts of poverty, particularly the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Education for All (EFA) Declaration and the Beijing Platform for Action. It looked at how these were engaged with and enacted in a range of local and national settings in Kenya and South Africa, two countries that had put in place policies to address poverty reduction and gender equality, were expanding education provision and had active players in relation to the global policy frameworks in these areas. Drawing on research conducted between 2007 and 2010 in a range of sites located in what we came to define as a middle space that lies between the site of policy formulation in global or international policy conferences and local realisation – the national and provincial education departments, a school, and two non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in each country – the project set out to investigate how connections were and were not made between global, national, regional and local policy and practice regarding gender, education and poverty reduction. A key aspect of this was understanding how stakeholders – including national and local bureaucrats, NGO officials and members of school governing bodies – working in these sites related to, understood and interpreted the global goals and how they drew on these interpretations in their interactions with each other and in their work and practice with regard to education delivery at national, provincial and local levels.

In this chapter we consider the research project's findings on the lack of connection to and ability to engage with the global goals that was apparent among many of the research participants. Drawing on the notion of impact as linked to a process of dialogue, capacity building and the co-production of knowledge, we then discuss the project's experiences of trying to open up spaces for discussion on these findings and consider the challenges that we encountered in doing this. We suggest that an important feature of achieving impact through the GEGPRI project was associated with the research team and participants developing their understanding of some of the dynamics of this stakeholder engagement with the global goals together through the research process itself. In our analysis of the way in which the project was able – or not able – to contribute to changes at local, national and global levels, we distinguish between what we have termed *impact with* – whereby a two-way process of dialogue and co-production of knowledge is directly associated with changes in understanding and practice – and *impact on/for*, linked to a more passive process of knowledge or information transfer that may be associated, sometimes indirectly, with shifts in awareness or forms of action. We also draw on work by the UK Collaborative on Development Sciences (UKCDS) in our analysis of how the research process and the co-production of knowledge initiated through it was associated with building capacity in relation to developing understandings of gender equality and poverty at the individual, organisational and environment – or institutional<sup>2</sup> – level (see Vogel 2012).

## 2. GLOBAL GOALS, GENDER AND ACTORS IN A MIDDLE SPACE

In September 2000, when the MDGs – including goals on poverty reduction, education and gender – were agreed by world leaders in New York at the UN's Millennium Summit, achieving the agreed targets within the 2015 time frame appeared achievable. The MDG frameworks were formulated with the intention of guiding and accelerating existing processes that had been initiated both internationally and through the reformist agendas of many national governments, and the summit itself marked the culmination of a decade of unprecedented levels of international collaboration in which issues relating to gender, education and poverty reduction had been a key concern. In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action from the World Conference on Women had been agreed by almost every government in the world and in June 2000 the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All was agreed by governments and civil society representatives at the World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal. The MDGs picked up on aspects of both the Beijing and Dakar frameworks, but, in relation to education and gender equality, they were considerably less ambitious in scope, with education framed simply in terms of access to primary schooling, and gender equality in terms of gender parity: equal numbers of girls and boys in school. Despite this, in the lead up to the 2015 deadline, it became clear that these limited targets would not be met: despite significant progress in reducing poverty rates (largely because of economic growth in China) and

increasing enrolment in schooling worldwide, in 2015 an estimated 57 million children worldwide remained out of school (UNDP 2015). Fewer than half of countries achieved the MDG 3 target of gender parity in primary and secondary education, and in 2015 girls from poor communities particularly continued to be likely to be out of education (UNESCO 2015).

The MDG and EFA frameworks, and the monitoring processes associated with them, were sometimes presented as requiring a 'simple' exercise of political will, resting on an unexamined assumption that policy in itself would be enough to make change happen. The findings from the GEGPRI research contest this. Instead, they suggest that although policy – and how ideas regarding gender, inequalities and rights are articulated within it – is important, the locations and relationships of people working with and interpreting policy from within the middle space also play a significant role in shaping how policy is realised. Our research findings from Kenya and South Africa suggest that stakeholders working within a middle space engaged with implementing policy do not do so passively. Rather, they are involved in processes of interpretation, negotiation and contestation.

In some cases, our research suggests that these processes entail expansions of ideas around rights, equality and understandings of gender, as could be found among some research participants working in international agencies in the global North (see North 2010). However, in Kenya and South Africa, while elements of this critical and strategic engagement with the global frameworks could be found among a few participants employed at national level and in the global NGOs, our interviews with government officials, local NGO workers and teachers suggest that making space for these sorts of critical discussions at national, provincial and local levels was much more difficult. Instead, we found that often the processes of interpretation and negotiation that occurred in relation to the global goals at national and local levels involved a narrowing of vision and a closing down of processes of democratic engagement with transformation (see, for example, Dieltiens, Unterhalter, Letsatsi and North 2009; Karlsson 2010; Unterhalter 2012; Unterhalter and North 2011b; Unterhalter, Yates, Makinda and North 2012). This could be seen, for example, in the Kenyan Ministry for Education where, although the MDG gender parity target was seen as a useful way to manage data and reporting across hierarchies upwards from the provincial level to the global, the general view was of a formal acknowledgement of the framework, requiring particular organisational actions but with little room for critical reflection or concern with inequalities beyond counting numbers of boys and girls. In South Africa, where the gender parity target had already been met, there was a sense among some officials that the MDG framework could be drawn on strategically to help open further interrogation of questions of gender or distribution of resources to attend to inequalities. However, interviews with participants also revealed how a gender-blind approach to equity was a key feature of policy text and talk in the department, with very little monitoring for gender equity beyond an assessment of enrolment numbers or matric passes.

In both countries, the relational dynamic between national, provincial and local sites of policymaking and enactment entailed a narrowing focus. For officials working in provincial and district education departments, or at school level, the global frameworks were often unfamiliar and viewed as something

coming from very far away. In these spaces, the limited opportunities for critical engagement apparent at the national level disappeared. Instead, in the face of the distance they felt from sites of policy development at national and global levels, participants often deflected responsibility for addressing concerns with gender equality to marginalised communities or poor girls and women. Thus in Kenya, what were termed 'cultural values', and the communities that practise them, were often blamed by officers for the failure to meet MDG targets, and gender inequities associated with education were located somewhere else, outside the responsibility of the education department. In South Africa, concerns with morality and pregnancy often dominated discussions of gender issues in the school, local NGO and provincial education department, with the blame for such 'problems' clearly placed on the girls and their families:

*girl children [are] opting to have children so that they [can] collect [the child support] grant. In our dialogues it came out a number of times that girl learners – some of them would come out in the open and say it's their parents pressing on them to have babies so that the entire family could receive something to eat, you know. So they are pushed into prostituting and uh you know: 'it's ok'.*

(South African provincial official, 6 February 2009)

We argue that, in the absence of opportunities to develop understandings of different meanings of gender, this process of blame and distancing, which draws on stereotypical assertions about the behaviour of the poor and, in some cases, particular notions of ethnic identity, was not only used by policymakers as an excuse for lack of progress, but was also associated with the active construction of horizontal inequalities. This had implications for practice: in Kenya, for example, the assumptions that poor parents from particular ethnic groups do not value education was associated with efforts to prosecute parents or 'rescue girls' from their communities; and, in both countries, a process of distancing and blame resulted in the maintenance of a horizontal disjuncture between the schools and their communities of parents and pupils. In all research sites there were few opportunities to question the assumptions on which these forms of actions draw or to initiate processes of critical reflection on the content of education or the nature of the policy- and decision-making process itself.

The GEGPRI research data thus suggest that a lack of understanding of and engagement with the complexities of gender inequality and poverty constrained and limited the extent to which actors charged with the enactment of global policy were able to effectively contribute to the transformation of gendered hierarchies and inequalities, and build the institutions necessary to support girls and women's rights in and beyond schooling. Finding ways to enable processes of debate and interaction that would support the development of more nuanced and reflective understandings of gender inequality was therefore an important aspect of thinking about impact in relation to our research. In the following section we discuss how the research process sought to engage research participants in dialogue around gender, poverty and inequalities, and what this might mean for practice, through a quasi-action research methodology.

### 3. ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS THROUGH QUASI-ACTION RESEARCH

Our research data highlight the complexity of local interpretations and engagements, and the project was designed to explore this. Integral to the GEGPRI project design was a quasi-action research methodology through which data was collected in each of the research case study sites and then fed back to participants, giving them a chance to reflect on emerging findings with researchers. It thus drew on learning from action research, which suggests that in order for research to have an impact in terms of effecting change ‘people affected by or having an effect on an issue should be involved in the processes of inquiry’ (Stringer 2013: xv).

The research design built in opportunities for discussion between researchers and participants over two cycles of reflection. The first cycle of data collection and reflection was followed by a second, where, one year later, researchers considered with participants what had happened in response to the issues raised the year before. This feature of the research design represented an attempt to get beyond the ‘snapshot in time’ form of research, where what is presented to research teams and what they select to comment on is only what participants or researchers seek to record. Through this method it was hoped the assumptions of the research team and the participants – all stakeholders working within the case study sites located in the middle space – could be scrutinised together. In this process, which entailed the co-production of knowledge between research team and research participants, it was envisaged that the issues of gender and education policy and practice across the multiple sites the study was concerned with – particularly vertical and horizontal relationships of meaning making, allocation of value, power, authority and distribution of resources – could be discussed, and challenges regarding change reviewed. It was hoped that this process would also enable the opening up of the sorts of critical discussions regarding gender inequalities and how they relate to poverty and forms of educational delivery that seemed to be so difficult to sustain in the different research sites in each country.

Central to this aspect of the GEGPRI research design was the organisation of report-back sessions held with research participants in each case study site at the end of each of the two main phases of research, after in-depth interview data collected from key stakeholders had undergone initial analysis by the research team. These provided researchers with an opportunity to present their initial findings, but, importantly, were intended to be participatory and relatively informal in nature to enable research participants to engage in critical discussion of these with the research team.

The two phases of the project, and the report-back sessions in particular, also enabled researchers to review changes that occurred in the case study site and to discuss these with participants through a process of co-production of findings. This made it possible to identify where the project itself had contributed to changes in people’s views and ideas on the issues under study, as well as where wider impacts in relation to changing policy or practice could be attributed to the project.

The research project also sought to encourage the active engagement and participation of research participants through the establishment of research advisory committees in each project, which included participants from case study sites as well as other relevant stakeholders, such as representatives from teacher unions, gender and women's rights groups, and NGO campaigners, as well as from within the research community. These advisory groups provided critical feedback as the research developed and presented the opportunity to develop discussions regarding the implications of the research findings with key stakeholders, both close to and critical of governments, over a more sustained period of time. As we discuss below, the presence of key research participants from particular case study sites within the research project's advisory group, in some cases helped bridge the insider–outsider divide between researchers and research participants, and, in doing so, was particularly significant both in facilitating access and in enabling research impact.

In developing the research project in this way, we aimed to have a modest impact in terms of catalysing discussion about the EFA and MDG goals among groups who, despite playing important roles in the enactment of gender and education policy, might not have heard of the global goals, or might have felt there was little they could contribute to reflection on them. Two key issues affected the extent to which we were able to achieve this aim. First, the repertoire of meanings and understandings of gender that participants were able to draw on, and the ways in which these were affected by their institutional and cultural locations, in some cases affected the sorts of discussions, and forms of practice that could be developed in relation to the research. Unterhalter (2009) has noted that the language of gender and the meanings associated with it are not always easily translated across contexts, and our research pointed to a range of different ways in which gender and ideas around equality were articulated and engaged with in the different sites. In some sites existing interpretations provided openings for dialogue, widening understandings and the possibility of transformative action. However, in others very attenuated notions of gender linked to limited framing of parity or essentialised identities, as well as wider contextual conditions associated with backlash and hostility to girls' and women's rights, made opening up discussions of research findings linked to changing practice more difficult.

Second, the nature of the relationship that was established between the researchers and the research participants, and the ways in which this was shaped by horizontal and vertical forms of connection and boundary making, played a significant role in shaping the form and extent of impact that could be achieved in relation to each site. While the research teams were outsiders to all the sites where data were collected, the angle from which we looked as outsiders was different in each site because we were positioned either closer or further away from key decision-makers, which had implications for how we collected and interpreted data. While in none of the research sites were members of the research teams insiders with close knowledge of the workings of the organisation on gender or poverty reduction, in some sites relationships with particular individuals gave opportunities for greater depth in interviews and observations, and more sustained forms of engagement.

The politics of knowledge, however, and the frameworks we brought to the data collection and analysis needed constant interrogation, and a research team from different countries, with contrasting perspectives on the issue, meant that the nature of emergent themes needed to be critically reviewed throughout the research process.

In the next section, in reflecting on our experiences in relation to impact at local, national and global level, we draw out some of the ways in which contested meanings, and the complex nature of the relationships that were established between research teams and participants, affected the ways in which research participants engaged with the project and its findings and were able to draw on them in their work.

## **4. BUILDING IMPACT THROUGH ENGAGEMENT AT THE LOCAL, NATIONAL AND GLOBAL LEVEL**

### **4.1 Local engagement: building fragile understandings of gender in schools**

When researchers started work in the two case study schools in Kenya and South Africa – both of which were located in peri-urban areas with high levels of poverty – there was a very clear positioning of the research teams as outsiders to the research sites. This positioning was occasioned by the perception of the research participants who felt that the research teams came from a higher level of education. In both countries the research teams coming from universities were at some considerable social distance from the teachers and parents interviewed. The university association meant there was little difficulty in securing access to the sites, once the necessary documentation had been provided, but the research team's positioning as outsiders meant that the level of access was limited to observing relations of learning and teaching, and interviews proved to be quite formal. Detailed observations of the school management were more difficult to secure.

At the school in Kenya, the team was well received and assigned an office where they could conduct interviews and write field notes. This office space was provided at the initial stages either as a way of keeping the 'guests' away from the staff room or because some of the teachers were pursuing further studies at the university where the researcher came from. However, over time researchers were able to develop more trusting relationships with school staff. Many teachers consented to stay after school hours for interviews. In South Africa, interviewing teachers was more of a challenge. Many female teachers did not frequent the staff room and staff left the school premises as soon as lessons ended. While access to school records in Kenya was granted readily, in South Africa copies of only a few school documents were made available. In both countries it was not possible to observe management and governance meetings. Thus, there were particular policy implementation and decision-making spaces that were deemed appropriate for an outsider to observe, but others that were only to be reflected on through formal interviews.

In both schools, however, despite the way in which boundaries were established between the school sites and the research teams, during the course of the research it was possible to engage head teachers and governing committee members in some discussion around the issues they faced in the schools. To some extent both the distance that the research participants felt from the global goals, and their view that they lacked capacity to engage with issues relating to gender, meant that, for some participants, the research process appeared to represent an opportunity to learn more from the research team, who were positioned as experts.

In the Kenyan school, despite the fact that a national Ministry of Education gender policy had been developed and was designed to help fill this gap in expertise, at the time of data collection it had not reached the school. All 12 teachers in the school were asked whether they were aware of the national gender policy and nine answered 'no'. One teacher explained: 'I have only heard [of gender policy] today as you brought the posters to school and as we are discussing [it]'.

None of the teachers had known or heard of anyone consulted about the policy, despite the fact that the school was located only 35 km from a very large city. Members of the research team took copies of the gender policy to the school and discussed some of the issues it raised in report-back meetings. The involvement of the research team in the school thus presented an opportunity for participants to learn about the policy and reflect on its implications for their work. In the exit interviews teachers were asked about what had changed in relation to the policy since the research had begun. The head teacher explained that as the pamphlets with the gender policy had been brought to the school by the research team, teachers would have read it, saying 'so nobody can have an excuse of not having read about it. So I can say that we now have it'. However, in discussing gender his own reading did not appear to have taken on the complexity of analysis in the policy, and for him the gender issues remained those associated with numbers enrolled:

It has changed in that it has improved. Last time the number of boys was bigger than the number of girls. But now, more girls are coming than boys. So the turn out has changed and it is not like the way we started

(Head teacher, Kenyan school, 28 January 2010)

For this head teacher, who was working in a context where the effects of poverty and hunger were seen as an urgent priority affecting children's attendance, and where even concerns with gender equality constructed in terms of parity of numbers were controversial among parents and community members, who expressed the view that promoting girls disrupted local traditions and cultural values, developing understandings of and practices linked to gender equality that went beyond this narrow view of parity was clearly not easy.

In the South African case study school, participants expressed a similar sense of distance and lack of familiarity with policy relating to gender coming from the national level, and, as with the school in Kenya, saw the presence

of researchers in the school as an opportunity to access information and resources. As in Kenya, there was a sense that research participants did not feel adequately prepared to understand and address gender issues, and in the report-back sessions they requested help from the researcher in developing their understanding of these. This is reflected in the following extracts from the report-back session:

*I think this research is an eye opener to all of us. To say the least I think we must agree that we were not aware that we are not doing any justice in this category of gender. Maybe if you have some things that you think can help us, because we want to know more about this so that we can start.*

...

*Perhaps... as you are connected with the Department of Education, what do they say about gender, please.*

(South African school report-back 26 June 2008)

Unlike in the Kenyan school, in the South African school the engagement with the project did translate into some widening of understandings of gender beyond a concern with parity. In the final report-back meeting the senior management team reported that they had made major changes in how they considered gender issues within the school as a direct result of the project. They said the staff now had greater awareness about gender issues, and that the school had established a seven-person committee comprising the SMT and staff from each of the academic phases and that this committee had begun to formulate a policy on gender within the school. The plan was that the committee would take up matters such as teen pregnancy. At the time the research was completed, however, they had yet to take any actions, and their comments – and requests for further help from the researcher – suggested that they continued to lack confidence with regard to understanding and responding to gender issues in the school.

These experiences in the two schools highlight both the importance and the challenge of deepening and sustaining dialogues beyond the lifespan of the project, in contexts in which stakeholders feel very far from processes of policy discussion and development, and lack both the professional development and the resources necessary to understand and address the complexity of gender inequality in contexts of poverty. The positioning of the researchers as experts who could impart knowledge on national and global policy, meant that while there was evidence of some impact in the school sites, this was in relation to *impact on/for* rather than *impact with* research participants in the schools. Although participation in the GEGPRI research contributed to raising awareness of gender equality as an issue among individual teachers and head teachers, and to building connections to national and global policy frameworks, it was much more difficult to build understandings that went beyond a concern with parity of numbers, or to connect these to wider institutional processes of transformation within the schools and communities in which they were located.

## 4.2 Talking across boundaries: research and reflection at the national and provincial level

In South Africa, although some participants from the National Education Department were hesitant to report on activities of the department without assurance that proper procedures had been observed to secure permission for the study, and a number of officers said they did not have time or appropriate knowledge to be interviewed, the team's previous working relations with this department and key officers holding an engaged interest in gender issues made gaining access easier than in a number of other sites. These relationships were also significant in shaping the sorts of conversations researchers were able to develop with research participants. Although boundaries positioned the researchers as outsiders, these lines were crossed with certain key informants who engaged in a deeper discussion and exchange with researchers. This, together, with the pre-existence of some more critical engagement with the MDG framework and wider concerns around gender and equalities among some participants, noted above, deepened the level of debate and reflection that occurred both within, and as a result of, the report-back meetings and discussion of research findings.

Of particular significance in enabling the development of a productive and critical exchange between researchers and research participants, was the participation of a more senior official with responsibility for equity within the department in the project's advisory group. This official had an interest in gender before the project began – and thus had been identified as an important contact for the project – but as the extract indicates, found this expanded considerably through the discussions with researchers. Thus engagement in the project played a significant role in influencing their work:

My involvement in the GEGPRI project as a government official, policy maker and perhaps more importantly a manager of policy implementation in such an unequal society, had a significant effect on my work. It gave me an opportunity to reflect differently on the work that I was doing, but more importantly, the process of engaging with the research and its findings, provided me with a new and different lens to think about how to do my work... The findings of the project helped me to think more carefully about policy assumptions and the disconnections between intention and reality, or the limitations of policy.

(National official, South Africa, by email, 8 November 2012)

This official reported that the project had resulted in a new focus on addressing teenage pregnancy within the national department, which tried to move away from blaming girls themselves to examining the role of the education system in engaging with girls who become pregnant as well as reflecting critically on the causes of pregnancy and the intersection with gender and other inequalities:

One example of how this project influenced [work in the department] was the imperative to find solutions to high levels of teenage pregnancy amongst schoolgirls... Through research that the Department commissioned on teenage pregnancy to understand the nature of the problems, and by working directly with provincial education officials and schools, it was possible to come to a greater

understanding of the inseparable links between poverty and gender inequality in relation to schoolgirl pregnancy and the limitations of written policy to manage teenage pregnancy within schools. We had to examine how schools deal with pregnancy, how they support learners who become pregnant and what support could be provided to teachers and principals in managing pregnancy. In the Department, we began to engage much more deeply with the complexity of inequality, the multiple causes of teenage pregnancy, the need to eradicate a 'blaming girls' culture, how practically to bring girls back into schools, how to provide adequate pastoral care, the role of families and communities and organisations working in the area. We knew that multiple levels of engagement were needed to fairly and equitably both understand the complex causes of teenage pregnancy and the ways in which schools deal with pregnant learners, as well as the impact of social attitudes on impeding fair policy implementation. Despite a policy that was fundamentally about ensuring continued access and support for pregnant schoolgirls, the reality of implementation was that social attitudes fundamentally influenced how schools engaged with pregnant schoolgirls, often working against policy objectives.

(National official, South Africa, by email, 8 November 2012)

This official's testimony suggests a very direct engagement with the project's findings with regard to the way in which discourses around blame, pregnancy and morality affected and limited the way in which wider gender equality concerns within education were interpreted and acted upon. It points to the initiation of a process designed to tackle this directly through working with officials at different levels in order to build and develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the interconnections between teenage pregnancy and wider gender issues within and beyond schooling. For this participant, active participation in and engagement with the research project was central in enabling impact through developing understanding at the individual level, which was then linked to wider impact at organisational and institutional levels, through work with officers across the department, and the development and implementation of new national policy.

In the provincial education department in South Africa, although researchers were not able to cross insider boundaries in the same way as occurred within the national education department, they were also able to establish good relationships with research participants, resulting in some engaged and critical discussion of findings, linked to concrete plans for action. In the first report-back session, when discussing findings from the first phase of research, participants identified the development of agreed policy on gender issues as a key need. As can be seen in the following extracts, they suggested that their engagement with the research had empowered them to take the conversation further, and push for more concrete action:

*[my colleague] next to me here was saying to me that this research is reflecting exactly what is happening... And I was saying to her that it came at a right time when we're going to have a seminar, in which we want to address such issues.*

(Gender focal point, South African province, 14 August 2009)

*As an individual I've been struggling [with] what is it really that we are not doing? We know that [gender]'s an add-on function but I am in a sub-directorate which we are dealing with policies and I've been struggling to go out and say [that] I have this [motions as though holding an imaginary document] so that things will go in my district this way. So now that you've just picked on that vacuum of policies... So thank you so much. I think the senior management will look at it very soon.*

(Provincial official, South Africa, 14 August 2009)

When the researcher returned to the provincial department for the second round of data collection, although it was not clear that these discussions had resulted in new policy development, a number of actions with regard to gender had taken place. These had provided space for further discussion and engagement with some of the issues raised. They included a gender mainstreaming workshop facilitated by the Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy and attended by administrative staff, a school-level training programme, and the establishment of Gender Focal Point networks at district level. Here, the discussion and actions that were generated stopped short of the engaged and critical processes that explicitly set out to tackle stereotypical and essentialised assumptions around gender and girls, and the discourse of blame that pervaded discussion and action to address school girl pregnancy that were initiated at the national level. However, they do point to a renewed commitment and energy to support capacity building and develop networks for the discussion of gender issues and the development and implementation of policy.

In contrast to the experience with the South African departments, working across the insider–outsider divide was much more difficult in relation to Kenya's national Ministry of Education, and this presented challenges both for the research process and for the extent to which we were able to clearly identify impact linked to the project. In Kenya, some members of the research team had prior personal and professional connections that helped secure access to conduct research. However, despite formal access permission from the government, they experienced difficulty in securing interviews and documents and arranging to observe meetings. Although some members of the research team had a long history of working with colleagues in the Kenya Ministry of Education, and in some ways saw themselves as a knowledge broker working between funders and bureaucrats in a middle space, shifting politics in the ministry, in which aid relationships, race and ethnicity were all in play at different moments, meant it was hard to consistently maintain such a role for the research team. As a result, some interviews were scuttled by impromptu meetings, or if they were held often the team was directed elsewhere for information about gender. Thus, access to the ministry was to a limited level only, and the team was kept at arm's length as outsiders. In many instances the researchers experienced gatekeeping that made it difficult to reach the senior officials.

This was exacerbated by narrow interpretations of gender equality as a technical issue that could be compartmentalised and addressed through particular organisational structures, rather than as being something that was embedded across different facets of the ministry's work. Despite the fact that gender was a cross-cutting investment programme under the Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP), the researchers were constantly referred to the gender officer for interviews on gender research. Responses such as, 'Yes, gender is a cross-cutting issue. The officer in charge of gender and education is the one who handles all these issues across the board. That is the person who will help you' were very common. It was thus difficult to establish a sense of shared concern on aspects of the question of gender between members of the research team and ministry officers.

This distance between the researchers and the research participants was reflected in the report-back sessions. These, although well attended by department officials, were much more formal and less engaged than those held in the South African national department. In these, while participants were keen to engage critically with aspects of the project's research methodology, there was much less willingness to engage with the findings themselves in any depth, or develop discussions around how to take these forward. This meant that, in contrast to the *impact with* that we documented in relation to the national department in South Africa, engagement with the research findings at a national policy level was much less immediate, and a wider range of processes around more traditional forms research dissemination had to be drawn on in order to achieve *impact on/for*. These included large dissemination events attended by a range of stakeholders including research participants as well as academics, other government officials, civil society organisations, community leaders, teachers and the media, and the extensive distribution of copies of the final report. It was also significant that the global NGO that took part in the study had a very close working relationship with the national Ministry of Education and was actively involved in the implementation of ministry programmes. This meant that some of the discussions that we were able to initiate with NGO staff through their participation in the project could be fed indirectly into the work of the national ministry.

Since the finalisation of the research project, there have been a number of significant developments in relation to gender in Kenya at the national level. Of particular note was the promulgation of the new constitutional dispensation in August 2010 following a successful referendum. In the constitutional order the issues of education and gender were enshrined: Article 53 paragraph (1)(b) states that every child has the right to free and compulsory basic education and in relation to gender Article 81(b) also states that the electoral system shall comply with the principle that not more than two-thirds of the members of elective public bodies shall be of the same gender. These two provisions marked a significant step towards achieving the two MDGs on education and gender equality, and the institutionalisation of a concern with gender equality. However, there are concerns as to how effectively they are being implemented. The findings from the GEGPRI

research suggest that ensuring that these constitutional commitments are realised through transformative action will require ongoing efforts to engage stakeholders charged with their delivery in discussion about what they mean and entail.

In the research sites associated with globally connected NGOs based in Kenya and South Africa, the nature of the boundaries that were established between researchers and research participants affected the extent to which project members were able to engage in the discussion with the level of depth required to facilitate impact, despite there being pre-existing relationships with key stakeholders and researcher participants. With professional connections and a sense of familiar 'insiderness' between some of the most senior staff of the national/global NGOs selected for study and certain members of the research team, it was anticipated that conducting these case studies would be easy. However, in both Kenya and South Africa, these case studies proved the hardest to complete.

In Kenya, initially it was difficult to gain access to the organisation owing to a tight command structure and the key decision-maker being away in the field or abroad. It was a challenge setting up interviews with officers running projects across the country and only published documents were made available. In South Africa, there were similar access difficulties and some interviewees felt their work did not have any gender focus. Ironically, despite the team's sense of kinship and insiderness with NGOs, strong boundaries positioned the teams as outsiders. The initial assumption that a global NGO, with a declared interest in gender issues, might be forthcoming with the research team was contradicted in the research process. The rhetoric that we were all insiders to a global civil society discussion on gender, education and poverty reduction was not given content during their fieldwork. The reasons for this were complex. In some cases they reflected power dynamics that affected relationships both within organisations and between individual participants and the research team. The process was also affected by logistical difficulties associated with small organisations being caught in tight time frames and budgets, in which research and deliberation is seen as somewhat luxurious. These were exacerbated by the contested nature of work on gender, and a sense of a backlash and hostility to work on women's rights within the wider environment in which the NGOs' work was located. In South Africa, for example, one interviewee who was working on a girls' computer literacy and empowerment project in a peri-urban area with high levels of poverty was open in discussing her previous experiences of women's activism and the hostility she has encountered:

*[At a meeting some months back before I worked for global organisation] I stood up and I was giving a statement on gender equality. I was just talking. I think I mentioned just one statement and all the men in the room walked out. They said we cannot come here and be humiliated and be forced to give women more rights... They did not just stand up and walk you know. There was a 'Whooo' in the room and there was a lot of noise... And now in relation to [organisation] work, cyber training the group. We normally have*

*parents meetings – parents of the children that attend cyber training and things that parents say you can hear. That it's not well taken by both parents. They say we are taking their kids somewhere...: taking their girls particularly so these girls are going to grow up to be lesbians.*

(NGO official, South Africa, 2009)

In this context, where even the provision of computer training to girls was hotly contested, opening up space for wider discussions around the transformation of gender inequalities was clearly very difficult.

Taken together, the experiences of working at national and provincial levels and with NGOs and education bureaucracies highlight the potential for research processes to engage research participants in processes involving the co-production of knowledge, and, in doing so, to open up new spaces for dialogue around complex issues in relation to gender equality in order to enable the development of new policy and practice, and institutionalise concern with the transformation of gender inequalities. However, they also point to the challenges of doing this. The GEGPRI project's experiences in these spaces highlight the importance of establishing and sustaining relationships with key research participants in order to develop and maximise *impact with* as well as *impact on/for*. Significantly, they also point to the importance of paying attention to the power dynamics that characterise relationships both within organisations and between researchers and participants, and of understanding the wider context within which individual and organisations are located and different meanings of gender are negotiated and contested.

#### **4.3 Global frameworks, indicators and implementation: learning for the Sustainable Development Goals**

In addition to the work developed in the two case study countries, the GEGPRI project also conducted research with key stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of global policy on gender and education who were based in international organisations located in the global North. These included international NGOs, multilateral agencies and bilateral donors. Although this element of the project did not adapt the quasi-action approach of two cycles of research and reflection through feedback sessions used in the case study countries, for some of the global research participants involvement in the research was nonetheless useful for their own work. One staff member from an international NGO, for example, explained:

*because what you have done, I have also been reflecting on these issues too. I was like, 'I don't know how I am going to answer these questions' but it has really helped me reflect*

(International NGO officer, 27 January 2008)

Finding ways to engage more widely in discussions on global policy initiatives in relation to gender, education and poverty at international level was also a key dimension of the project's approach to impact. One way in which we did this was through participation in the E4 conference hosted by the

United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) in Dakar, Senegal, in 2010. The conference, which was held online and face to face, brought together practitioners, national and international policymakers and researchers working on gender and education to review ten years of the UNGEI and other organisations concerned with gender and education since the world education conference held in Dakar in 2000 (see Peppin-Vaughan 2010). Members of the GEGPRI research team participated in the organising committee for the conference, presented findings from the GEGPRI research and contributed to the formulation of the conference declaration.

The E4 declaration, which was developed at the conference, noted the progress that had been made in reducing the numbers of girls out of school, but also recognised that 'poor quality of education, extreme poverty, structural inequality and violence against girls continue to jeopardize the achievement of the education- and gender-related Education for All and Millennium Development Goals by 2015' (UNGEI 2010). In arguing for 'urgent action in support of girls' rights to education, gender equality and empowerment opportunities', it set out a meaning and understanding of gender equity that went considerably beyond the minimal stress on gender parity in the MDGs, and the narrow ways in which this had been interpreted by many of the research participants in Kenya and South Africa.<sup>3</sup> This reflects the nuance of the discussions that occurred at the conference, which facilitated the development of richer understandings of gender equality in education among conference participants. However, the declaration stopped short of setting out strategies for action or a clearer indicator and measurement framework through which these could be monitored (see Unterhalter and North 2011a for more detailed discussion).

Since the E4 conference, global policy attention has turned to the development of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework.<sup>4</sup> The findings from the GEGPRI project with regard to the experiences of the MDGs raised a number of significant issues for the development and implementation of the SDGs, and researchers from the project have been actively involved in feeding these into deliberations and consultation processes on the SDG framework. Our findings on how participants working at national, provincial and local levels and from within national departments and NGOs interpreted the MDG targets and drew on them in their work, clearly revealed the limitations of the indicators used within the MDG framework, particularly the gender parity indicator. Researchers from the GEGPRI project have been actively engaged in the discussions and consultations on indicators for the SDGs at the global level, working closely with the UNGEI to input into the development of indicators relating to gender equality and education. Moreover, the research project itself, and the experiences of the research process documented in this chapter, also highlighted the need for much wider consultation on the SDGs. To a large extent this has been taken up, with extensive consultations at regional, national and local levels, through, for example, platforms such as 'the world we want' and the ID100 project.<sup>5</sup> These large surveys and consultation processes, however, did not look closely at issues around the middle space and the complex relationship the stakeholders working in this space may

have with issues around gender equality. Our research findings, and our experiences of the research process itself in relation to thinking about impact, suggests that continuing to explore, theorise and engage with actors in this middle space will be essential as we move into the post-2015 agenda.

## 5.1 CONCLUSIONS

Discussion of impact in relation to research projects often focuses on building impact either from the bottom up or from the top down. The GEGPRI project experience suggests that while these are both important, so too is paying attention to the people working in terrains of the middle space located between these two extremes of the policy arc. Stakeholders engaging with policy from within national and local education departments, NGOs or school governing bodies play a significant role in shaping the form its enactment takes. Yet our research suggests they often do not have opportunities to step back and reflect critically on the policies themselves, or the – often complex – issues associated with them. Using research – and the research process itself – as a way of creating opportunities for this reflection, can therefore be an important part of achieving impact.

The GEGPRI research highlights the importance of engaging stakeholders working in the middle space, but, like subsequent research studies in this area (see, for example, DeJaeghere 2012; DeJaeghere and Wiger 2013; Unterhalter 2016), it also uncovered how fragile the understandings of these stakeholders may be. The project documented many different meanings of gender across the different research sites and highlighted some of the challenges in developing and supporting meanings that stressed equality, human rights and social justice, rather than entailing distancing and blame or a knee-jerk gesture towards noticing girls, often in some essentialised ways that focused on vulnerability and embodiment.<sup>6</sup>

The research thus points both to the possibilities and to the challenges of thinking about impact in relation to complex – and often contested – ideas such as gender equality. It suggests that developing and sustaining impact requires complex, two-way collaborative processes, which may involve stakeholders providing new research agendas, as well as researchers finding and reflecting on things that may be uncomfortable to them. Our experiences through the GEGPRI research suggest that in order to support change it is important to open and sustain new spaces for dialogue and discussion, but also to pay attention to building and crossing bridges, translating between insiders and outsiders, and reflecting on the connections between what works and what matters (Unterhalter 2009).

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## ENDNOTES

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- 2 Drawing on Unterhalter (2007), we associate institutional capacity with the establishment of legal, organisational, redistributive, or regulatory processes that are necessary for the transformation of inequalities.
- 3 According to the declaration: 'Achieving equity in education will entail putting in place a rights-based empowerment framework that will target the most vulnerable and transform power hierarchies in learning spaces, communities and policy structures in order to give poor and vulnerable girls a voice and ensure that their right to quality education is sustained'.
- 4 See <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs> for details of the goals and targets.
- 5 See [www.beyond2015.org/world-we-want-2015-web-platform](http://www.beyond2015.org/world-we-want-2015-web-platform) and UNRISD and SIID 2015.
- 6 In this way the research foreshadowed some policy and programme changes that were emerging, exemplified, for example, through the girls' education challenge, which emphasised 'what works' to get girls in school, with very limited attention to how to understand marginalisation and do integrated development to support change (see Unterhalter 2016).

