



CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING IN RESOURCE-CONSTRAINED EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: MODELS, CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

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ABSTRACT: *This study critically examined School Improvement Planning (SIP) in resource-constrained educational settings across Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), focusing on models, challenges, and lessons learnt. Using a qualitative, interpretive design, the research used a systematic review of peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and grey literature from NGOs and donor agencies. Data were obtained from academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, ERIC, and institutional repositories, with inclusion criteria limited to studies published between 2010–2025 that addressed School Improvement Planning or related school reform strategies in SSA. Thematic analysis was used to extract findings, while critical evaluation and comparative synthesis appraised methodological rigor, contextual relevance, and cross-country differences. Validity was reinforced through triangulation of sources and PRISMA guidelines, while ethical considerations focused on precise representation and citation. Findings revealed that SIPs present a structured framework for school improvement but face considerable obstacles in resource-constrained contexts. Key lessons include the centrality of equity-sensitive financing to circumvent widening inequalities between rural and urban schools, the need for contextualized teacher professional development embedded in SIP frameworks, and the crucial role of community-driven accountability in consolidating implementation. Evidence from Ghana, Uganda, and Kenya revealed that while participatory approaches augment ownership, systemic inequities in funding, teacher distribution, and infrastructure weaken effectiveness. Opportunities lie in innovative resource mobilization, adaptive policy frameworks, and rigorous monitoring and evaluation systems that incorporate local cultural and social contexts. Overall, SIPs in Sub-Saharan Africa exemplify both assurance and limitations: they succeed when policy alignment is balanced with contextual adaptation and when structural inequities are deliberately given attention to achieve sustainable, inclusive educational change.*

KEYWORDS: Implementation, Monitoring, Planning, Policy, Resource-constrained, School improvement.



INTRODUCTION

School Improvement Planning (SIP) is a structured process through which schools identify priorities, set goals, and implement strategies to improve instruction, learning, and the general institutional performance (Leithwood & Strauss, 2009; Mason, 2019). It involves the identification of current school performance, setting realistic objectives, and the execution of targeted interventions. Successful SIP normally emphasizes teacher development, curriculum alignment, student support, and community commitment. In well-resourced contexts, SIPs are supported by sufficient funding, strong leadership, and rigorous monitoring systems. Nonetheless, in resource-constrained environments, such as many schools in Sub-Saharan Africa, the process is often slowed down by financial limitations, infrastructural shortfalls, and systemic inequalities (Mason, 2019).

Proper implementation of School Improvement Plans in resource-constrained contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa requires a critical analysis of the situation so that evidence-based intervention can be made. According to UNICEF, while access to education in Sub-Saharan Africa has expanded considerably in the last two decades, many schools still struggle with congested classrooms, inadequate instructional materials, and under-qualified teachers (UNICEF, 2021). Curriculum modifications have been attempted in several countries, but accomplishment gaps persist due to fragile institutional capacity and inadequate resources (Kanjee, Sayed, & Rodriguez, 2016). In Uganda, current reforms have focused on the lower secondary school curriculum where there has been a shift from knowledge-based learning to a competency-based approach with critical emphasis directed towards enhancing life skills to meet the growing demand for practical knowledge in the job market (MoEs, 2020). However, the implementation of this school improvement initiative has encountered several hindrances including inadequate funding, large classes, an ill-trained workforce and text-book delays. Similar challenges in school improvement plans have been experienced in Rwanda (Honeyman, 2016) and South Africa (Chisholm, 2015). These challenges indicate that SSA countries still have a long way to go to ensure that they align their school improvement planning with the available resources.

In many Sub-Saharan African countries, primary school enrollment rates have risen significantly, with some countries reaching nearly 90% enrollment (UNESCO, 2023). In the face of this achievement, quality remains a main disquiet. For example, in Uganda, scores of schools face congested classrooms, with pupil-to-teacher ratios exceeding 50:1 in the countryside districts (Zickafoose et al., 2024). In Nigeria, scarcity of instructional materials and pitiable infrastructure continue to weaken learning outcomes, predominantly in northern states where poverty and insecurity aggravate educational challenges (UNESCO, 2023). Likewise, Kenya has registered significant success in increasing access to education, but rural schools habitually lack electricity, libraries, and laboratories, making the execution of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) hard (World Bank, 2022). In Ethiopia, rapid enrollment growth has led to congestion and strained resources, while in Tanzania, teacher inadequacies and limited professional development prospects hamper the efficacy of SIPs (Zickafoose et al., 2024). These examples demonstrate that while access has improved across Sub-Saharan Africa, the quality of education remains uneven, and SIPs face considerable obstacles in resource-constrained settings.

Therefore, this study on SIPs in Sub-Saharan Africa is essential to appreciate how schools can prevail over resource constraints, improve quality, promote equity, and sustain reforms.



By seriously examining lessons, challenges, and opportunities, such research can guide policymakers, educators, and development partners in designing more successful and context-sensitive improvement plans.

General Objective of the Study

To critically examine the effectiveness of School Improvement Planning in resource-constrained educational settings in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a focus on identifying lessons learned, challenges faced, and opportunities for enhancing educational quality, equity, and sustainability.

Specific Objectives of the Study

- i. To explore contemporary models of School Improvement Planning and their relevance to Sub-Saharan Africa
- ii. To critically examine the current practices of School Improvement Planning (SIP) in Sub-Saharan African countries
- iii. To explore the key challenges that hinder the effective implementation of School Improvement Plans (SIP) in Sub-Saharan Africa
- iv. To evaluate the lessons learned from existing School Improvement Planning (SIP) initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative, interpretive design, focusing on a critical review of published research, policy documents, and reports on School Improvement Planning (SIP) in Sub-Saharan Africa. The approach and design not only helped to summarize existing findings but also decisively assess their strengths, weaknesses, and applicability to resource-constrained contexts. The data sources for this study included peer-reviewed articles from education and development journals; policy reports such as publications from UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, African Union, and national ministries of education and grey literature from NGO reports, donor evaluations, and case studies from Sub-Saharan Africa.

The study used academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, ERIC, and institutional repositories. Keywords used to search data included; “*School Improvement Planning*”, “*Educational reform in Sub-Saharan Africa*”, “*Resource-constrained schools*”, “*Education quality Africa*” and “*SIP challenges and opportunities*”. The inclusion criterion was based on studies published between 2010–2025, focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa and addressing SIPs or related school reform strategies. Studies outside the region or those not directly addressing SIPs were explicitly excluded from the study.

Thematic Analysis was employed to extract and categorize findings into themes such as *lessons learned, challenges, and opportunities*. Similarly, critical evaluation was used to assess methodological rigor, contextual relevance, and policy implications of each study. Moreover, comparative synthesis helped to compare findings across countries (e.g., Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia) to identify commonalities and differences.



The study employed multiple sources (academic, policy, and grey literature) to ensure balanced perspectives, while critical appraisal tools, specifically PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews), helped to evaluate the quality of included studies. To ensure transparency, document search terms, databases, and inclusion/exclusion criteria were applied for purposes of replicability. Since this is a literature-based study, no direct human participants were involved. Ethical responsibility focused on accurate representation of sources, proper citation, and avoidance of plagiarism.

FINDINGS

Contemporary Models of School Improvement Planning and their Relevance to Sub-Saharan Africa

It is important to recognize that a plethora of school improvement models have been developed and used to help in the implementation of school improvement plans across countries. The Comprehensive School Improvement Planning (CSIP) model focuses on long-term strategic planning, often spanning three to five years, with clearly defined goals and milestones. Fullan (2010) states that CSIP emphasizes consistency by aligning vision, mission, and operational strategies, while Bryk et al. (2015) underscore its ability to maintain improvement through iterative cycles. Conversely, Meyers and VanGronigen (2025) contend that CSIP has been widely adopted in the United States and Europe, but its application in Sub-Saharan Africa requires contextual adjustment. However, Gaziel (2010) cautions that rigid adherence to CSIP frameworks may fail in low-resourced environments, where flexibility is critical.

It is also noted that data-driven SIP models rely heavily on continuous data collection and analysis to inform decisions. Bryk et al. (2015) argue that evidence-based interventions boost accountability and transparency, while Meyers and VanGronigen (2025) contend that data-driven models enhance instructional quality by identifying gaps in education delivery systems. Yu (2007) discovered that SACMEQ assessments in Sub-Saharan Africa provided valuable insights for policy, though Niemann et al. (2017) warned that fragile data systems weaken effectiveness. Adeniyi et al. (2024) state that data-driven models risk strengthening inequity if data collection excludes marginalized groups. The debates show the centrality of building robust data infrastructures in Sub-Saharan Africa before adopting fully data-driven SIPs, stressing tensions between methodological rigor and practical viability.

It is also noteworthy to stress that strategic planning models focus on aligning school vision and mission with a limited set of priorities. Fullan (2020) emphasizes that prioritization prevents “initiative overload,” while Harris and Jones (2017) highlight that strategic consistency fosters leadership focus. Meyers and VanGronigen (2025) note that in Sub-Saharan Africa, schools adopting strategic planning models often reduce fragmented initiatives into a few high-impact goals, improving outcomes. However, Gaziel (2010) warns that strategic planning may fail in contexts where systemic instability undermines long-term planning. Yu (2007) found that in Rwanda, localized strategic planning improved responsiveness, with stakeholder involvement registering marked improvement over the past decade. However, the worry is, as evidenced in various scholarly debates, can such models be scaled across diverse African contexts without risking fragmentation?



On the other hand, continuous improvement model emphasizes iterative cycles of planning, implementation, monitoring, and adjustment. Bryk et al. (2015) contend that this model encourages compliance and responsiveness, while Fullan (2010) underscores its association with systemic reform. Meyers and VanGronigen (2025) point out that continuous improvement models have increasingly become relevant in the global education improvement arena, although Niemann et al. (2017) warn that they require strong leadership and stakeholder buy-in, which may be lacking in resource-constrained African schools. While Yu (2007) found that iterative approaches enhanced literacy outcomes in Uganda, Adeniyi et al. (2024) stress that continuous improvement risks becoming superficial if monitoring systems are fragile.

Another school improvement initiative is the Collaborative SIP model, which emphasizes stakeholder participation, where teachers, parents, and communities work together to ensure that they work as a team to arrive at workable solutions to school-related challenges. Harris and Jones (2017) state that participatory approaches foster ownership and sustainability, while Lupoz and Villocino (2023) highlight that community-driven SIPs, enhance accountability. A study carried out in Uganda by Kagoro and Ezati (2014) found that schools with functional SMCs registered 12% higher PLE pass rates, while in Malawi, a study by Kendal (2007) observed that schools with trained SMCs improved Chichewa reading initiative significantly. In the same way, Yu (2007) found that participatory SIPs in Ghana improved transparency, yet Adeniyi et al. (2024) suspiciously warn that socio-economic disparities in many SSA countries limit meaningful stakeholder involvement. Despite these disparities, Meyers and VanGroningen (2025) still emphasize that participatory models are particularly pertinent to Sub-Saharan Africa and can go a long way to improve learning achievements in the sub-region.

Then there is also what is termed as Equity-focused SIP models, which prioritize addressing disparities in access and outcomes. This model emphasizes that equity must be central to SIP design (Fullan, 2020), yet Cheng (2020) underscores that standardized policies are necessary in promoting fairness by ensuring minimum standards. Adeniyi et al. (2024) emphasize that equity-focused SIPs in Africa must address systemic inequalities such as poverty and gender disparities. Yu (2007) found that equity-driven SIPs improved outcomes in disadvantaged communities, though Niemann et al. (2017) caution that without systemic reforms, SIPs risk reinforcing inequities. Scholars debate whether equity-focused SIPs should prioritize marginalized groups or adopt universal approaches, reflecting tensions between targeted and systemic strategies.

Scholars have also developed what they call the Sustainability-oriented SIP models, which emphasize long-term viability by integrating environmental, financial, and social dimensions. Meyers and VanGronigen (2025) maintain that sustainability calls for an approach that involves embedding SIPs within broader systemic modification, yet Bryk et al. (2015) underscore the significance of iterative cycles for maintaining change. However, Gaziel (2010) warns that donor-driven sustainability models habitually disintegrate when external funding ends. In Tanzania, sustainability-oriented school improvement models place emphasis on incorporating environmental education, competence-based curricula, and community-driven reforms to align with national and global sustainability goals. Key approaches include Whole School Improvement Planning, curriculum reforms embedding sustainability, and innovative strategies for achieving SDG4 in secondary schools (Sizya,



2025; Malandi & Demetria, 2024). This model, if appropriately adopted by other Sub-Saharan African countries, can go a long way to make school improvement planning a proactive tool in reshaping educational systems across countries.

Equally important are, the hybrid SIP models that combine elements of data-driven, participatory, and continuous improvement approaches. Hybrid models, which are often referred to as “blended learning”, integrate face-to-face instruction with online platforms. Instead of replacing one method with the other, they deliberately combine strengths to enhance learning outcomes. For example, a teacher may introduce a concept in class, assign an online simulation for practice, and then use the next session for collaborative problem-solving (Mulenga & Shilongo, 2024; Jackson, 2025). Rwanda’s hybrid school improvement model places much attention on blended learning in Technical Secondary Schools (TSSs), combining face-to-face teaching with digital tools to modernize education, expand access, and align with Vision 2050 goals for sustainability and inclusiveness (Rwanda TVET Board, 2024; Ministry of Education, 2023). This innovation works best where ICT infrastructure is well developed in schools and more so in situations where school staffs are well oriented with relevant skills and knowledge to handle its complexities.

Current Practices of School Improvement Planning (SIP) in Sub-Saharan Africa

It is important to note that School Improvement Planning (SIP) in Sub-Saharan Africa is frequently framed as a means to improve accountability and learning outcomes. This claim has been debated by many scholars and practitioners in the field of education, resulting in a plethora of academic assertions. As such, Yu (2007) argue that SIP provides structured pathways for schools to self-evaluate and align with national education goals. On the other hand, UNICEF (2020) postulates that SIP frameworks in Sub-saharan Africa continue to be exceedingly prescriptive, restricting contextual adaptation. On the contrary, Zickafoose et al. (2024) highlight that SIP in Sub-Saharan Africa can be transformative if localized but, warn against donor-driven models that prioritize external accountability over community ownership. Such overtones call for interventions that give a clear distinction between country-specific models and those that are globally standardized so that adaptations address problem-specific needs.

Whereas policy frameworks in a country like Uganda emphasize SIPs as a tool for decentralization where local leaders together with school technical teams, agree on areas of intervention through school self-evaluation (MoES, 2012), in Kenya, it has also been proven that SIP grants improved resource allocation, especially when local governments effectively followed guidelines put in place by the ministry of education (Wachira & Nyandoro, 2024). Yet, UNESCO (2023) critiques policy inconsistencies in many Sub-Saharan countries, noting that SIP often lacks integration with broader national strategies where various agencies and stakeholders often fall short of a uniform voice directed towards a common goal. This variation in opinions stirs a debate whether SIP should be primarily school-led or centrally coordinated, with UNICEF (2025) advocating for hybrid governance models. Yu (2007) reports a positive correlation between SIP and student achievement in Tanzania and Ghana yet on the other hand, Burns (2020) contends that SIP has limited impact on secondary education outcomes due to systemic bias. UNICEF (2025) argues that SIP efficacy depends on teacher capacity and community commitment. This debate centers on whether SIP can independently drive improvement or whether structural modifications are prerequisites.



Available literature indicates that there are a lot of challenges to SIP and these include inadequate funding, weak monitoring, and socio-economic disparities. Zickafoose et al. (2024) points to resource constriction as a key barrier to SIPs. Amone (2021) points to cultural and linguistic diversity as a problematic feature in SIP implementation. It is opined that whenever there are cultural and linguistic barriers, it becomes extremely difficult for school leaders to mobilize communities to participate in SIPs. On the other hand, UNICEF (2025) singles out the inability by educational administrators to develop digital innovations as an overarching challenge during the monitoring of SIP implementation in schools. The extent to which digital innovations can be applied to mitigate such barriers is not well articulated by scholars of school improvement planning. What is clear is that in poorly resourced settings, the challenges to School Improvement Planning become even more severe and problematic to the extent that many schools cumulatively fail to meet the intended targets in the different aspects of school performance.

Community involvement is frequently noted as vital to SIP implementation, especially in localities where school leaders struggle to mobilize the required resources. Wachira and Nyandoro (2024) contend that parental involvement in Kenya was an indicator for school accountability. This is because school stakeholders needed to take part in the utilization of school resources to enhance transparency. Nonetheless, Burns (2020) critiques tokenistic involvement, emphasizing that communities are often sidelined in decision-making because their views are rarely incorporated in school improvement plans. This causes not only unrealistic but also unnecessary overlaps in prioritizing the utilization of school resources. However, UNICEF (2020) supports structured pedagogy models that integrate community voices at all levels of School Improvement Planning. If properly managed, community participation creates a sense of ownership and commitment in the implementation of SIPs. However, scholars remain divided as to what strategy works best in resource-constrained settings such as in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Teacher capacity is central to SIP because it enhances teachers' ability to perform school improvement tasks appropriately. This is because teachers are the primary agents of change in classrooms. Strong teacher capacity ensures that strategic plans translate into effective practice, driving student achievement, sustaining reforms, and aligning innovations with real classroom needs (Hanover Research, 2025; Muskin, 2018). However, teacher capacity and training in Sub-Saharan Africa remain a critical challenge, with shortages of qualified teachers, uneven professional development opportunities, and systemic gaps in training policies. Despite progress through initiatives like UNESCO's Teacher Training Initiative for Sub-Saharan Africa (TTISSA) and collaborative networks such as Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA), many countries still face issues of outdated curricula, and inequitable access to training policies (UNESCO, 2006; OpenLearn, 2024). Yet to address systemic gaps in training and development, training policies need to be aligned to the countries' educational goals and the overall development plans. Several Sub-Saharan African countries including Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and parts of Nigeria face persistent issues of outdated curricula and inequitable access to teacher training opportunities. These challenges weaken efforts to attain Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education) by restraining inclusivity, teacher preparedness, and curriculum relevance (Zickafoose, et al., 2024; Ezaki, N. & Ogawa, K. 2024; UNESCO (2022).



Scholars also remain divided on donor-driven SIP initiatives in low-resourced countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Kenya, for instance, Wachira and Nyandoro (2024) maintain that donor financing led to improved financing and learning outcomes across many schools in the country. Yet, Zickafoose et al. (2024) maintains that overdependence on external financing damages sustainability and national sovereignty so much so that when schools fail to achieve their budgets using their own sources, they are left with no alternative but to put into operation SIPs according to rigid procedures dictated by donors. Over-reliance on donor funding for school improvement planning in Sub-Saharan Africa has shaped both opportunities and vulnerabilities. While external aid has led to increase in an access, infrastructure development, and teacher training, it has also led to dependency, misalignment with local priorities, and sustainability challenges (Zickafoose, et al. (2024); UNESCO, 2022; Ezaki & Ogawa, 2024). However, UNICEF (2025) suggests that donor support should be transitional, enabling local ownership in the implementation of SIPs.

It is therefore important to emphasize that future SIP models should balance accountability, inclusivity, and adaptability. UNESCO (2023) calls for integrating SIP with early childhood education policies that facilitate developing strong basic priorities in order to reinforce institutional capability right from the foundation of the educational ladder. Yet UNICEF (2025) emphasizes aligning SIP with continental frameworks like CESA 16–25 where school leaders from resource-constrained settings can learn best practices from the developed ones. Burns (2020), nonetheless, argues that without addressing systemic inequalities and leakages across many resource-constrained nations, there will always be endless calls from external actors to arrest the situation. The solution is to develop models that align with the local contexts through all stages of SIP implementation in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Challenges to Effective Implementation of School Improvement Plans (SIP) in Resource-constrained Environments in Sub-Saharan Africa

One of the most cited barriers to effective SIP implementation in resource-constrained environments in Sub-Saharan Africa is financial inadequacy. Scholars contend that without adequate financing, SIPs risk becoming cupboard documents rather than actionable strategies. Aldridge and McLure (2024) posit that in many Sub-Saharan countries, schools often lack the financial capacity to procure instructional materials or spend on infrastructural development, while Lupoz and Villocino (2023) argue that budgetary deficits lead to unfinished projects and disheartened staff. Meyers and VanGronigen (2025) further assert that financial limitations aggravate inequalities, as highly resourced schools can execute SIPs more successfully than inferior ones. On the other hand, some scholars contend that groundbreaking resource mobilization, such as community partnerships, can partly compensate for fiscal limitations, though this remains contested in contexts of deep poverty.

It has also been discovered that leadership capacity is central to SIP success, yet many schools in Sub-Saharan Africa lack leaders with the required skills to drive change. Fullan (2020) contends that successful leadership calls for matching administrative duties with instructional regulation, but institutional leaders in underfunded settings habitually face irresistible workloads. Aldridge and McLure (2024) argue that weak leadership across Sub-Saharan countries results in deprived synchronization and indistinct priorities, while Meyers and VanGronigen (2025) emphasise that leadership discrepancies weaken accountability systems. On the contrary, some scholars propose that distributed leadership models, where teachers and community members share responsibilities, can alleviate these challenges. Yet



debates endure on whether such models are practical in environments where professional development prospects are in short supply.

It is also argued that stakeholder commitment is broadly acknowledged as a basis for SIP performance; however, in resource-constrained environments in Sub-Saharan Africa, involvement is habitually negligible. Lupo and Villocino (2023) stress that unwarranted premeditated activities sometimes alienate parents and reduce student participation, while Harris and Jones (2017) underscore that fragile partnerships between schools and communities lead to disjointed efforts. Aldridge and McLure (2024) stress that inadequate parental contribution weakens ownership of SIP goals, discouraging sustainability endeavors. On the other hand, some scholars posit that grassroots commitment can be promoted through culturally receptive practices, though Meyers and VanGronigen (2025) caution that such strategies necessitate momentous time and resources, which are frequently inadequate.

Another persistent theme in the literature is the misalignment between national education policies and local school realities. Fullan (2010) stresses that top-down reforms in Many Sub-Saharan African countries impose impracticable prospects on schools with limited capacity, while Matsumoto (2019) notes that policy directives often fail to consider contextual limitations such as poverty and cultural diversity. Aldridge and McLure (2024) further argue that this misalignment leads to outward conformity, where schools produce SIP documents to satisfy bureaucratic directives without significant accomplishments. Nevertheless, Cheng (2020) asserts that standardized policies can encourage impartiality by making sure all schools conform to minimum improvement standards. This debate highlights the tension between homogeneity and contextual sensitivity in SIP design.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems are crucial for SIP accomplishment, yet resource-constrained schools habitually lack the tools and proficiency to follow progress effectively. Meyers and VanGronigen (2025) emphasize that evaluation systems are either missing or defectively planned, leading to imperfect feedback loops. Bryk et al. (2015) stress that without dependable data, schools cannot regulate plans or show accountability. On the other hand, Lupo and Villocino (2023) highlight that fragile M&E weaken stakeholder self-belief. Some scholars advocate for low-cost, community-driven evaluation models, but critics argue that such approaches lack rigor and comparability. Ineffective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) in Sub-Saharan Africa is a recurring challenge, often resulting in weak accountability, poor data use, and limited sustainability of reforms. In Uganda, SIPs under the Universal Primary Education (UPE) program have undergone weak scrutiny, where reports underscore weak data gathering, inadequate feedback, and lack of community participation, leading to leakages in accountability. The National Planning Authority's assessment of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy in Uganda established that school inspection and SIP monitoring were only partly effective, with frail accountability and pitiable data use undermining outcomes (National Planning Authority, 2018).

Cultural and contextual factors such as gender norms, community attitudes, indigenous knowledge systems, and socioeconomic inequalities often hinder the effective implementation of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) in Sub-Saharan Africa. These factors limit inclusivity, weaken accountability, and reduce the sustainability of reforms (Zickafoose et al, 2024). In Zambia, School Improvement Planning (SIP) is highly subjective to factors such as language diversity, respect for authority, communal values, socioeconomic



inequalities, and organizational culture (Bwalya, 2016). These elements shape inclusivity, accountability, and the sustainability of reforms, often creating both opportunities and barriers. Bascia and Hargreaves (2000) underscore that reforms often fail when there is a mismatch between local values and traditions yet Cheng (2020) stresses that globalized education reforms if not checked risk marginalizing indigenous practices. Therefore, in lowly resourced countries, stakeholders may prioritize instantaneous survival needs over long-term educational goals, generating resistance to SIP inventiveness.

Lessons Learnt from Existing School Improvement Planning (SIP) Initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Leadership has consistently emerged as a critical determinant of SIP success in Sub-Saharan Africa. Effective SIPs depend on visionary and competent school leaders. Studies highlight that principals and school management teams should have not only administrative skills but also the ability to foster collaborative environments. Leadership that prioritizes teaching and learning outcomes has proven more effective than purely bureaucratic management (Chanda, 2025). African perspectives indicate that distributed leadership where responsibilities are shared among teachers, parents, and community stakeholders strengthens accountability and inclusivity. This approach ensures that SIPs reflect local needs, cultural values, and indigenous knowledge systems, making reforms more sustainable (Africa Education Knowledge Platform, 2024). Similarly, Yu (2007) emphasizes that effective leadership promotes accountability and drives instructional improvement, specifically in situations where schools face systemic challenges. From the above assertions, its evident leadership effectiveness is undermined by structural inequalities across many Sub-Saharan countries.

Community involvement has been a recurring lesson in SIP initiatives across Sub-Saharan Africa. Community-led interventions, such as those in Malawi, reveal that when local actors propose and fund education projects, reforms are more durable. For example, mothers in Ntchisi leveraged agricultural expertise to finance school activities, ensuring continuity even in resource-constrained settings (Brookings Institution's, 2025). Studies in South Africa's Eastern Cape show that Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (**PALAR**) foster collaboration among multiple stakeholders. However, lessons highlight the need for coherent collaboration and inclusive language use to avoid silencing marginalized voices (Rangana, Geduld, & Sathorar, 2023). Harris and Jones (2017) argue that SIPs succeed when parents and local stakeholders are actively engaged, as this fosters ownership and accountability. Lupoz and Villocino (2023) note, however, that excessive demands on communities can lead to disconnections, mostly in impoverished areas where parents struggle to meet basic needs

Another important lesson is that resource constraints remain a major challenge, but SIP initiatives have manifested innovative mobilization strategies. Meyers and VanGronigen (2025) highlight that collaboration with NGOs and local businesses have complemented school budgets, allowing schools to implement planned activities. In Sub-Saharan Africa schools depend greatly on effective resource mobilisation to address persistent drawbacks such as insufficient facilities, limited teaching materials, and underfunded programs. One critical approach is aligning SIP priorities with government education budgets and national development policies, making sure schools get reliable public funding. At the same time, engaging communities through parent-teacher associations and local leadership encourages ownership, accountability, and contributions in the form of volunteer time, materials, or small financial support (UNICEF & African Union Commission, 2021). In Uganda, the Ministry of



Education and Sports (MoES) developed Evaluating and Improving the Quality of Education guides to help schools conduct self-evaluations and prepare SIPs. Schools mobilise resources by involving parents, local government inspectors, and NGOs in identifying priorities and funding needs. These grassroots efforts not only supplement limited budgets but also strengthen the bond between schools and the communities they serve.

Another key lesson from SIP initiatives is the importance of aligning policies with local contexts. Fullan (2010) argues that top-down reforms often fail in Sub-Saharan Africa because they impose unworkable prospects on schools with limited capacity. One of the key lessons learnt in Sub-Saharan Africa about aligning policy and contextual adaptations in School Improvement Plan (SIP) implementation is that national education policies must be flexible enough to accommodate local realities. For example, in Ghana, the Capitation Grant Scheme required schools to prepare School Performance Improvement Plans (SPIPs) with stakeholder input, but delays in disbursement highlighted the need for contextual adaptations such as community fundraising and NGO support to sustain implementation (Kwaah & Ampiah, 2018). Similarly, in Uganda, SIPs were strengthened by participatory self-evaluation guides developed by the Ministry of Education and Sports, which encouraged schools to adjust national quality standards to local contexts by involving Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) and School Management Committees (SMCs) (MoES, 2012). These cases show that while policy alignment promotes consistency and accountability, contextual adaptations such as community-driven resource mobilisation are essential for practical sustainability in diverse socio-economic settings. Yu (2007) found that localized SIPs in Rwanda were more effective than externally imposed models, as they reflected community priorities. However, localizing priorities requires joint efforts among local leaders and other stakeholders whose involvement should provide a leveled ground in decision-making and resource utilization.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) in Sub-Saharan Africa has revealed important lessons about accountability. In Ghana, the implementation of School Performance Improvement Plans (SPIPs) under the Capitation Grant Scheme revealed that involving Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) and School Management Committees (SMCs) in monitoring enhanced transparency and ownership. However, Kwaah and Ampiah (2018) found that delays in grant disbursement undermined effective monitoring, stressing the need for strict financial accountability systems. In Uganda, the Ministry of Education and Sports came up with self-evaluation guides that helped schools evaluate improvement against SIP targets. These participatory tools encouraged schools to adapt national standards to local realities, but evidence from the Directorate of Education Standards (2012) revealed that weak capacity in data gathering and reporting limited the effectiveness of monitoring. Yet in Kenya, SIPs integrated into school strategic plans confirmed that orderly monitoring through annual reviews and audits helped schools track resource mobilization and learning outcomes. Collectively, these country experiences reveal that while policy frameworks offer structure, effective SIP monitoring and evaluation rely on structuring local capacity, promoting timely resource flows, and engaging communities in accountability processes.

Teacher professional development in Sub-Saharan Africa has shown that School Improvement Plans (SIPs) succeed when training is contextualized, school-based, and continuous rather than one-off workshops. Proof from Ghana, Rwanda, and Uganda underscores the criticality of peer learning, leadership support, and inclusive strategies to make sure teachers can successfully implement SIP priorities (Ministry of Education and



Sports, 2012; Zickafoose et al., 2024; Nyirahabimana & Magagula, 2024). Research across Sub-Saharan Africa reveals that time-honored workshop-style training habitually falls short of addressing the varied desires of teachers, specifically in the countryside and marginalized communities. For example, Ghana's experience with SIP-linked training indicated that involving teachers in shared planning and peer mentoring enhanced literacy and classroom management outcomes, while superficially imposed training programs repeatedly lacked significance (Kwaah & Ampiah, 2018). Similarly, Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports prioritized participatory self-evaluation and teacher-led reflection as part of SIP implementation, which reinforced accountability and contextual adaptation (MoES, 2012). These cases show that aligning professional development with SIP goals necessitates empowering teachers to co-create solutions rather than inactively receiving orders. Another lesson is that successful SIP-related training must integrate leadership development and inclusive pedagogy. The GPE KIX symposium in Côte d'Ivoire (2023) highlighted that school leaders play a pivotal role in supporting teacher growth by creating compassionate environments and linking training to measurable SIP outcomes (Nyirahabimana & Magagula, 2024). Rwanda's STELIR project, supported by the British Council and Mastercard Foundation, revealed that targeted professional development in English language teaching enhanced both teacher confidence and student performance, while also addressing gender and equity gaps (Mitchell et al., 2024). These examples stress that SIPs succeed when teacher training is consistent, inclusive, and embedded in school leadership structures. The broader lesson is that professional development must be treated as a long-term investment in teacher agency and school improvement, not a short-term intervention.

Lessons from Sub-Saharan Africa show that cultural and social contexts play a crucial role in how School Improvement Plans (SIPs) are implemented, monitored, and sustained. In Ghana, Kwaah & Ampiah (2018) established that SIPs were more effective when they reflected local cultural contexts, such as involving chiefs, Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), and School Management Committees (SMCs) in decision-making. This participatory approach ensured that school priorities aligned with community expectations and values, fostering ownership and accountability. However, they also noted that cultural hierarchies sometimes limited the voices of women and marginalized groups, underscoring the need for all-encompassing strategies. In Uganda, the Ministry of Education and Sports (2012) stressed that SIPs should adapt to different social contexts, including rural schools where poverty inhibited parental contributions. Here, cultural norms of communal responsibility encouraged community volunteerism. Similarly, in Kenya, school strategic plans linked to SIPs showed that acknowledging social certainty such as disparities between urban and rural communities was critical for resource mobilization. The broader lesson across Sub-Saharan Africa is that SIPs cannot be implemented as uniform policy tools; they must be adapted to local cultural and social contexts to enhance inclusivity, sustainability, and genuine community ownership.

Systemic and structural inequities have profoundly determined the implementation of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) in Sub-Saharan Africa, revealing lessons about resource distribution, governance, and equity in access to quality education. In Ghana, the Capitation Grant Scheme was brought on board to sustain SIPs by abolishing school fees and disbursing funds straight to schools. However, Kwaah & Ampiah (2018) discovered that inequities endured because highly resourced schools in urban areas were better positioned to mobilize additional resources, while rural schools remained underfunded. This underscored the lesson that SIP should be accompanied by an equity-sensitive financing system to circumvent



widening disparities. In Uganda, the Ministry of Education and Sports (2012) noted that SIP implementation was constrained by systemic inequities such as uneven teacher supply and limited infrastructure in rural regions. Even with participatory self-evaluation tools, schools in disadvantaged areas struggled to meet SIP targets, showing that structural inequities in resource distribution undermine the effectiveness of improvement plans. In Kenya, strategic school plans associated with SIPs proved that while schools could mobilize considerable resources through parental contributions and income-generating projects, systemic inequities meant that poorer communities could not uphold such efforts. A peculiar lesson across Sub-Saharan Africa is that SIPs must be implemented with intentional strategies to tackle systemic inequities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, serious perspectives on School Improvement Planning (SIP) in resource-constrained educational settings in Sub-Saharan Africa show that while SIPs present a well-laid structure for enhancing school quality, their success depends on the capacity to adapt models to local realities and address systemic inequities. Lessons from countries such as Ghana, Uganda, Rwanda, Zambia, and Kenya reveal that SIPs are most successful when they incorporate participatory strategies, align with national education policies, and mobilize varied resources from government, communities, NGOs, and the private sector. However, challenges such as delayed funding, weak institutional capacity, and discrepancies between rural and urban schools underscore the structural hindrances that dent implementation. The broader lesson is that SIPs cannot be considered as uniform policy instruments; they must be context-sensitive, equity-driven, and supported by continuous monitoring and teacher professional development. Successful models highlight community ownership, inclusive stakeholder involvement, and inventive financing mechanisms that lessen dependency on external donors.

At the same time, addressing systemic inequities such as unequal teacher distribution and infrastructure gaps is crucial in ensuring that SIPs do not strengthen existing disparities. Ultimately, SIPs in Sub-Saharan Africa illustrate both the promise and the limitations of school improvement frameworks in resource-constrained settings: they thrive when policy alignment is balanced with contextual adaptation and when structural inequities are deliberately dealt with to create sustainable, inclusive educational change.

Recommendations

- i. Governments should design funding formulas that prioritize underprivileged schools, ensuring SIPs do not buttress systemic inequities. Capitation grants and targeted subsidies must be disbursed on time and monitored for transparency.
- ii. Teacher training should be incorporated within SIP frameworks, pointing to school-based mentoring and peer learning rather than one-off workshops. This builds sustainable instructional capacity aligned with SIP goals.
- iii. PTAs, SMCs, and local leaders should be formally integrated into SIP monitoring structures. This strengthens cultural ownership and guarantees that plans mirror social realities while enhancing transparency.



- iv. Innovative resource mobilisation Schools should vary funding streams through collaborations with NGOs, private sector CSR programs, and income generating projects. Blended financing models decrease dependency on external donors.
- v. Adaptive policy frameworks National education policies should stay flexible, permitting SIPs to adapt to local cultural, social, and economic contexts. This ensures that improvement plans are not inflexible templates but flexible tools.
- vi. Robust monitoring and evaluation SIPs should include clear indicators, school-level data systems, and participatory evaluation processes. This enables evidence-based modifications and reinforces accountability at both local and national levels.

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