This collection provides essential reading for anyone concerned with research and understanding of the momentous developments of African educational reform in the last 15 years. This is work that is of great significance to comparative educational studies in the Third World in general. It also provides a window on the world of donors and agency strategy. It provides a potential template for reform for a new generation of scholars – whether policy-makers or historians of education. It is an attempt to systematically probe the nature of the post-colonial educational reform in Africa – in particular the reform undertaken since the era of Education for All (1990) and the neo-liberal turn in macro-economic policy (Structural Adjustment Policies) in the 1990s. It reveals many of the weaknesses and strengths of the educational reform agendas. In short, what are the gains to education from the transition to a ‘managed economy’ and multi-party democracy in the cases dealt with here?

It is a grim tale of the consequence of a staggering educational failure of post-colonial states with authoritarian/dictatorial systems – whether driven by Marxist ideology or African patriarchy/nationalism – and the inability to grapple realistically and successfully with urgent issues relating to the relationship between development and education. It is the story of the mixed consequences of international and agency intervention in that situation during the 1990s, when these countries were beginning to emerge into a new political era. The study foregrounds the actions of USAID and the World Bank in particular, in relation to the plans for systemic reform or rehabilitation of education. It notes the extent to which these agencies talk to and talk past the local ministries and reveals the strengths and weaknesses of systemic approaches to reform in underdeveloped policy contexts. It also notes in places how local elites or local political dynamics circumvent technocratic solutions to the question of educational delivery.

The focus of the work is on the aftermath of the seminal World Bank Policy Study of 1988 on Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Policies for Adjustment, Revitalization and Expansion and the commitments made at the Education for All conference at Jomtien (1990) to donor and government action to remedy the situation of ‘deterioration and despair’ that had been identified.

The five case studies dealt with in the volume include Benin (Michel Welmond), Guinea (Michel Welmond), Ethiopia (James Williams), Malawi (Karen Mundy) and Uganda (Jeanne...
Moulton), where there has been a degree of common experience in the engagement with educational reform. In each case the educational reforms are engaged with as part of a ‘historical political transition’ (p. 87) that is both generally characteristic of the times and unique to the specific national context.

The collection recounts the variety of structural policy changes proposed for poor African states with various degrees of cooperation and agreement. The collection emphasizes the structural context of the changes sought – in every case the aid of donors being tied very tightly (in form if not always in deed) to the implementation of structural adjustment guidelines to macro-economic policy imposed by the donor or by the IMF, though the specific economic conditionalities are perhaps not always sufficiently emphasized. The three kinds of reform identified by Michel Welmond for Benin are extremely useful categories for reviewing all case studies: systemic reform, preservationist reform and rehabilitative reform. The agencies favour the former, the local ministries and pressure groups often focus on the last, and the actual experience gained through the case study research seems to indicate that educational outcomes are often strongly influenced by varieties of preservationist agendas (hidden or overt) in the process of translating rhetoric into reality.

This means that the package of reforms arranged for each context needs to be linked and understood in the context of a wide range of policy changes – the expansion of access to basic primary education (UFA), the reform of secondary and tertiary education, curriculum development, teacher professionalism, supply and support, the strengthening of strategic management, attention to school governance, the supply of teaching materials, the transfer of resources to rural schools, and the strengthening of financial controls, to mention only a few. This package of reforms came at a time when all of these countries found themselves vulnerable to the new constraints of international monetary policy and the globalization of policy inherent in neo-liberal or free market solutions to educational policy issues. The politics of the solutions is not examined with care. We are only aware that local politicians and administrators do not always cooperate with the rational systemic solutions presented by USAID or the World Bank. The ‘politics behind the avoidance’ or ‘ineptitude’ in the eyes of agency bureaucrats clearly masks a whole world of African politics beyond the scope of the study. James Williams notes that ‘Ethiopians and USAID officials sometimes understood Ethiopian needs differently’ (p. 173). Welmond notes with regard to Benin, ‘If the ministers and funding agencies had been able to discuss their conflicting goals and seek strategies for mutual accommodations and compromise, the reforms might have proceeded differently’ (p. 112). But do such views of policy not betray something of a naïve belief that education reform can take place in a perfect zone of rationality and that a smooth transition from policy design to policy implementation is possible despite the actual political agendas that are palpable if the wider picture is taken into account?

The ambiguities of understanding about the policy process do not diminish the value of the studies before us – but rather beg for a deeper exploration of the individual dynamics of educational politics in the context of weak democracies and often corrupt administrations emerging from years of misrule. This does not refute the desirability for aid or provide grist for an argument against aid, but it rather opens up the whole historical debate about the specificity of educational policy and the need for area-specific solutions to education policy issues. The case studies provide as much of an account of why policies work as why they do
not and it would be valuable to explore these issues in more detail – not just through the lines of international policy development in the field of educational aid, but through the broad politics of globalization within which these specific countries are embedded.

As the authors themselves admit, there is a great need for local scholarship, or at least non-donor research, on these issues. This call is difficult, as there is a fundamental weakness in national research capacity, and often the lack of a research environment that would make possible the development of critical African scholarship, especially in the poor countries dealt with here. The lack of research and absence of African scholars at CIES and WCCES conferences in recent years are a physical manifestation of the challenge and it occurs at a time of marked decline in critical voices in those forums since the mid-1990s. Does that mean that the agencies are now getting it right or that the critics are too wary to make harsh criticisms? Or is it that there is a bewilderment at the extent of the task to be tackled?

It would seem that this volume provides essential knowledge and insights into the education reform agendas and realities of countries with poor track records of educational delivery to the majority of the people. As such it provides an excellent starting point for a sober assessment of the prospects for educational reform in Africa in the 21st century.

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