The theme of the 2014 American Educational Research Association Conference is “The Power of Education Research for Innovation in Practice and Policy.” What do you see as the most promising educational change innovations and what role does/should research play in relation to such innovations?

I think what we did in Uwezo (described in more detail throughout this interview) was very innovative, in many ways. It captured the imagination of many people in ways that you have not seen any research do. Our work shows the very close link you can develop between research and the people... it leads people to think about something that leads to change.

In the past, we have had a lot of research happening, but it had never been of the scale that we have in Uwezo, and it had never had a simple approach. Research has always been very technical. Sometimes researchers do technical work for technocrats. So you end up creating your own specialized audience that will understand regression analysis, etc., but nobody else will really understand. However, when you open research up and decide that it is everybody’s responsibility to understand, for me, that is innovation. When you present information in a way that not only captures the knowledge, or the mind if you like, but also captures the heart, then you find that you begin to influence the way people are doing things, and eventually you influence policy making.

When we first released our work, we knew from the very beginning that we had to use language that people use day-to-day. We are not keeping anybody away. Everybody is an audience of our message. And so we said, for example, that there were children in class 8 and class 7 who could not do class 2 work. Anybody can understand that! Because we presented our work in a very simple manner that can be understood by all, it got traction to the extent that wherever we go we no longer need to introduce ourselves and what we do. We have now gotten to the next level of discussions: “When you say that children in this grade are not doing well, what would you advise me to do?” This is the type of questions the head teachers are asking us.
and we tell them “Look at your own practices in school. Who is teaching your lower grade?” Then teachers begin to say “Actually maybe this can be an idea…” We don’t tell people what to do. Answers are often within people themselves. It is about you sharing information in a way that speaks to them and that is when they reexamine themselves and their practices, and begin to do something about it.

Can you tell us about Uwezo, its origins, its key activities, and major achievements and challenges?

Uwezo began in 2008 as an initiative aimed at drawing public attention to children’s learning. Its creation was inspired by the Head of our organization, who put together a team comprising university professors, actors from civil society, and officers from ministries of education in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. This team went on a study visit to ASER in India, a program managed by Pratham – the largest non-governmental organization in India. And we saw some very exciting citizen-led action happening in education. We saw citizens who were able to conduct research and to use this information to inform themselves. This was a group that was not waiting for answers from above, from the ministries of education or from the government, but had actually decided to actively find solutions. And I think that what inspired us most was the fact that the work was evidence based, that it was about everybody, not just technocrats, and that it was about people taking charge of their own destiny.

The Hewlett Foundation provided the initial support and was willing to work with us as we navigated the process of trying to initiate Uwezo in East Africa. So, I wouldn’t say there was one person who started it; it was like there were many different seeds and many different minds that came together to be able to start Uwezo in East Africa.

At Uwezo we have two key activities. First, and this is the biggest one, we conduct household-based assessments in all the districts in East Africa. In other words, we have a nationwide sample, which makes us the biggest in the region, only second to the national census.

As a second activity, we do not stop at collecting that evidence, but we think about how to communicate it in ways that are simple and accessible to all, from the parent to the policymaker.

These two main activities have many related actions. So if I was to look at, for example, the communications strand of our work, we go through the process of identifying which particular target group we want to identify to focus on in the year and thereafter come up with various tactics or products that we will be able to communicate to them. For parents, we have identified radio because radio is very popular over here and because we need to be interactive. Then we use telephone calls and sometimes texting. So we have mega activities and very many sub activities within each.

We are very ambitious. We want to talk to millions of citizens in our region. We are not just aiming at small projects over here, we want the message of owning your education, changing, focusing on learning, to be something that is discussed in every corner of East Africa.

In our theory of change, we give great premium to information because we believe that any decision-making process needs to be evidence based. And this information needs to go through various processes to become useful knowledge. The reason I think we have been very successful in working with policymakers and implementers is the way we package the information. If you look at our information, it is in very brief, easy to read and factual information, where we share perhaps only seven facts.

We don’t follow the normal approach to
change that many would. We believe in partnerships and always ‘nudge’ friendly organizations into collaborative work. For example, one of the organizations we work with very closely in Kenya has started a program, where they are actually investing their time and resources in training lower-grade teachers. They decided to go to schools that are ranked lowest in the Uwezo evaluation. They use our tests as their baseline to be able to see the level children are learning at. In Uwezo we believe in an ecosystem of change where you influence many other people who identify with what you think is important and then they are the ones who start implementing ideas inspired by this exchange.

In terms of its achievements, I think Uwezo has been very successful in bringing the learning agenda to the forefront. Previously, discussion about education was mainly about the inputs: Do we have enough teachers? Do we have any classrooms? What about the funding? Nobody was talking about what these inputs were supposed to do. But today you will find attention to learning. For me, the biggest achievement has been to bring out the focus that education is about learning, not just about schooling.

The second achievement comes from doing large-scale studies. As you know, people who are in policymaking positions love studies of scale because you can generalize. We do large-scale studies in East Africa, and we can also compare results with other countries, because we have Uwezo-like approaches happening in West Africa, Pakistan, and India. Because of this, we are now able to contribute to the international discussion. Especially now that you have a lot of discussion happening around the post-2015 Education For All agenda, I feel that the work we have been doing in the last five years in East Africa has suggested that we need as nations of the world to be paying attention to learning, to outcomes, and not just to inputs in education. So, we could claim collective achievement in terms of bringing the learning agenda to the forefront. It is now in people’s minds, in the citizens’ minds, in the policymakers’ minds and also in the international policymaking arena.

The third achievement, which is perhaps the most dear to me, but also one of the most difficult to prove, is that we have been able to shift attention to the internal, to look at what our strengths are rather than having this distance from actions, looking at things from the outside and being dismissive because it’s somebody else’s responsibility. Formal education is seen as something the professionals are supposed to take care of. It is very easy to put a distance and say that formal schooling has people who are supposed to take care of it, and therefore, as a parent my responsibility is just to ensure my child is at school and to stop there. We have been able to start discussions in many communities throughout our partner organizations about the fact that if you do not put your head and your heart into education, then you will not be able to influence its destiny. If you want to raise the quality of education for your child, then as a parent, irrespective of whether you are literate or not, irrespective of your socio-economic status, you need to be active.

I think we have started to energize this citizen agency. This is important because when citizen agency is energized, then you are no longer going to take anything for granted. If a duty bearer is not doing what they ought to do, you start asking simple questions, and sometimes those simple questions are enough to start getting action.

Let me give you an example. Last week I was with our partner organization that we have interacted with since 2009. They told us that after they had personally participated in accumulating this data and after realizing that learning levels were unacceptably low, they decided to start mentoring children. The group
of mentors is made up of young volunteers, mostly comprising university students. The doors of the organization are now open to young people, who are able to receive support without paying for anything. It is something they did not have to wait for the government to do because they have these skills that they can share amongst themselves. This is the kind of agency we are talking about, a parent feeling responsible and therefore reaching out and opening doors to members of the community.

About our challenges, oh, there are many! When you are as ambitious as we are, you will find that the challenges keep on emerging. I’ll mention two of the ones that have been on my mind more than others. The first is communication. If you look at our theory of change, we invest a lot in communication. Once our evidence comes out, we start communicating because we want conversation and debates happening, so that people are influenced not just by their emotions, but also start conversations about how to make the necessary changes. Often we think that we have not been as aggressive in our communication as we ought to be. True enough, today Uwezo is quoted by policy makers, everybody knows about us. We have been very successful in certain quarters but not in others. We could have done a little bit more to address the different clienteles, the different audience groups, so that we understand a little bit better how to reach out to them. Maybe we needed to have scaled-up slowly but we started with a bang and that has brought its own problems.

Related to that is the question of monitoring. Because of the scale that we aim for, we have to use the mass media, and that is one of the most difficult things. A colleague of mine once said that with the mass media “you spray and pray,” hoping that the message will fall on fertile land. But you are not quite sure. And even if it is fertile land and the message falls on it, it is still very difficult for you to know. So monitoring, based on the methodology that we have opted to use, becomes a challenge. If you are not monitoring well, then you do not move on to the next step. We have been able to tighten our monitoring and learn so that we take a step up very much like going up a ladder, rather than going around in a circle, which sometimes has happened to us.

What are some major lessons that Uwezo can offer to other countries interested in encouraging public engagement in education?

In many ways, Uwezo has achieved a lot. We have been able to influence the thinking and the discourse in education like no other organization has. If you ask me why we are able to do that, this is the advice that I would give to other organizations: base anything you do on evidence. When we started saying that children were not learning, we were able to give actual evidence and to put our methodology out there for anybody to question. And when we were able to show that this was happening not only in the city, but across the country, nobody thought about challenging the findings. So, after the shock, people went to the next level by asking “why is this happening?” We do not have the luxury of just doing research for research sake. So if you are doing research, then it is important to do research that should be able to at least influence the change that you want. So defining and having a robust methodology becomes an asset to you.

The second lesson for me is allowing true ownership. I know the words “participatory” and “empowerment” have been used in many places, but it is really about making these concepts come alive in the work that you are doing. We have done this in Uwezo. When we were starting Uwezo, it was not about me going and thinking about it on my own. We got teams that were made up from people of the ministry of education, university professors, etc. It was a ‘we’ approach from the start. Don’t think
through the whole process and then start involving other people, saying now we can bring in the government, now we can bring in the partners. Think together! When you do this, you involve people, not in a talking manner, but in a true manner of friendship and respect. And I think we have been able to do this in the key processes that we undertake and people appreciate it.

The third one, which is very dear to my heart, is that Uwezo is not extractive. We are not extractive, where you use people and agents to get knowledge for your own benefit. If knowledge has come from somewhere, let’s make sure that knowledge benefits people there. At Uwezo we engage data collectors who come from the very villages where the assessment data is being gotten from. So when you do that, it means that this data collector who remains in that community, remains with knowledge which they can share and make it come alive in that particular place. So not everything just goes back to the center, something remains in the community. Also, in the process, we share our skills, such as research skills – because we train them – which they can then use to obtain information and to make sense of that information. You can see a process of knowledge creation that is shared by the community as a whole.

This has been very important because when people understand they are part of the process of creating knowledge, they begin communicating it to others, even without your involvement. So the fact that we are known everywhere is because of this basic respect that lets us not be extractive and lets us build skills that will empower people in the various levels they are. If you keep those as basic principles then I think you will find that your work flows. It becomes easy.

You joined Uwezo after being a university professor for 15 years in Kenya. Why did you do that and what did you learn in the process?

To be honest, when I first joined this team that was going to India I had no intention of leaving the university. My life had been in the university and so for me I thought that trip was simply going to be another very interesting research project. But as immediately as I started working on the ‘research’, the idea just swallowed me up and the next thing I did was to resign from the university.

I think from a personal and professional point of view, I was getting to that point where I was getting disillusioned by just doing research and stopping at the recommendations level when there are so many practical needs. This opportunity grew and I grabbed the chance to think critically and deeply about one aspect. It felt like the natural place to be in. Leaving the university was a very difficult choice to make. I enjoyed teaching and it really took me perhaps one year of thinking through and finally when I did leave, I started wondering, why did it take me so long to leave the university? Outside here is very active!

The learning curve has been steep. I had to learn, for example, about the use of technology. In Kenya today, the possibilities of technology are immense, and it is not just about keeping abreast with technology. It is also about learning how technology can work better for you in terms of sharing information.

Overall, it has been very satisfying and it has brought me to a different realm than I would have been able to get had I been at the university. I will probably go back to the university in some years, I don’t know, but for now there is a lot that still needs to be done in this place where I am sitting.

What are some key educational challenges that you would like to see East Africa engaging in moving forward?

I think there are so many problems with our education provision in East Africa. But, as one
person once said, “If you want to hold everything, you end up holding nothing.” So over the years I have come to delimit my focus. Perhaps if you bite something that you can chew, then you will be able to go a little bit forward.

So coming from that thought, there are two or three things that I would like to see. I would like to see our schools moving towards an emphasis on skills, and society moving towards instilling a demand for these skills and competencies. A very simple example that I would like to see would be that after a year or two of a child attending elementary school, her parent would ask, “My child has been coming to school and is not able to read, what is the issue?” So this parent would be demanding the skill of reading, the skill of writing because at the moment we do not have that demand. And because we do not have that demand, it is leading to a large lack of accountability. You will find teachers who are not coming to school or sometimes come to school but are not in the classroom and are not bothering to teach because nobody is expecting anything or demanding anything specific from them. So if we see this demand coming, then probably we will begin to see changes happening in our schools and in society.

If I were able to achieve something like that, I think I would be happy and say that our evidence, our focusing on the fact that children are not learning will have led to something. But this is also in the realm of attitudinal change, and attitudinal changes take a while, maybe ten years. But when you do see it – because I have seen it in other school systems, where you have specific skills that are expected of different sections and sectors – then I think that would be a very significant change that I would have seen in education.

So I am very modest in my expectations, and that is one modest change I would like to see. Because I think it will come with changes in how teachers view their responsibility. And if we do see that change, then you are going to see a lot of professionalism injected. And once the teacher is a professional, the rest will flow smoothly.

NOTES
More information about Uwezo can be found at: www.uwezo.net
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