Background Document 3

Action Memo on Foundational Learning[1]

The Global Education Forum was established in 2019 to address challenges in the education financing architecture and develop greater collaboration between and coordination of education donors, and to advocate for investment and the acceleration of progress towards SDG4.

Based on the outcomes of the Global Education Forum meeting in September 2020 and the priorities identified in the COVID-19 recovery packages of the GEM and the Save Our Future White Paper, **the April 2021 Forum meeting will focus on a selected number of urgent Action Areas for the coming year as schools reopen and countries turn their attention to building back better in education.** The Action Areas for discussion in the April 2021 meeting include: School Health and Nutrition, Teachers and Vaccination as part of School Reopening, Foundational Learning, and Digital Learning for All.

To facilitate progress on each of these action areas, three Forum working groups have been established, led by Forum members (World Food Program for School Health and Nutrition, World Bank for Foundational Learning, and UNICEF for Digital Learning) and including Forum members from bilateral and multilateral donors. The special issue on teachers and vaccination was developed by the Technical Advisory Group of Experts on Educational Institutions and COVID-19, which is co-convened by UNESCO, UNICEF, and the WHO.

The aim of the thematic working groups is to develop concrete proposals for action and build consensus between Forum members on how to move specific themes forward. To support this process, **each working group developed an Action Memo** including a statement of the problem, key priorities to build back better, and concrete proposals for multi-agency action.

In this Action Memo, we consider proposals for more effective donor investment in and coordination for Foundational Learning. The proposals were developed by a working group which was led by the World Bank and included representatives from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Education Commission, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, Pratham, UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, Uwezo, as well as education researchers

[1] Drafting of this action memo was carried out primarily by Penelope Bender (World Bank) and Luis Crouch (RTI), with important sections drafted by Michelle Kaffenberger (RISE), Rebecca Rhodes (USAID), Marla Spivack (RISE), and Jason Weaver (World Bank). It reflects the discussion in the working group comprised of representatives from the above organizations as well as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Education Commission, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, Pratham, UNESCO, UNICEF, and Uwezo.

Introduction

Low- and middle-income countries have greatly expanded access to schooling over the last 40 years. This achievement, though, is fragile in many ways. The more one moves from measures of initial access (intake), to measures of persistence through the primary grades, and then to primary school completion, and finally to learning, the more fragile the achievement seems.

During the 25 years after the Jomtien Declaration in 1990, intake into first grade grew 34% faster than primary school completion in the poorest 30 countries in the world.[2] For those countries, completion is currently approximately 46%. At current rates of increase, it would take until 2045 to reach 100% completion. Furthermore, *repetition and dropout rates are so high that in the least efficient countries, it takes two grades worth of schooling for every grade of progression, resulting in an efficiency level of some 50%.* Overloaded curricula, insufficiently supported teachers, an absence of teaching and learning materials, and the frequent use of languages of instruction that students do not know result in unacceptably high repetition and dropout rates and the tragically low learning levels reported by UIS and others.

In response, the past fifteen years have seen the design and implementation of innovative foundational learning (grades 1-3) programs, most focused on research-based approaches to improving early grade reading levels. During this time, instructional approaches centered on teaching, teaching & learning materials, classroom assessment, language of instruction, and other key issues have been trialed and evaluated. Country-level activities have given rise to global collaboration to improve foundational learning, including the Global Reading Network, the Global Digital Library/African Storybook/Pratham's Storyweaver, and global advocacy groups such as the People's Action for Learning (PAL) network. Currently, there are many advocates, funders and practitioners working around the world to improve foundational learning, refining instructional approaches and improving implementation scale and fidelity.

These efforts have produced clear evidence about effective approaches to improving learning and success stories about organizing education systems to improve foundational learning at scale. Governments, donors, international NGOs, and national NGOs have all developed successful programs, often in partnership. While there are powerful donor coalitions in a few areas that are more about access than learning *stricto sensu*, such as girls' education, if there is one focus area related to learning around which a donor coalition could be formed, it would be foundational learning in reading and mathematics (Crouch, forthcoming).[3] It is important to note, however, that socio-emotional skills are complementary to these basic academic skills and that developing socio-emotional skills do not need to come at the expense of a focus on basic literacy and numeracy. Basic skills can be built most successfully through active, learner-centered approaches which can also be used to begin developing a far broader range of skills from an early age (Save Our Future, 2020; Winsler et al., 2014).

[2] Original data work undertaken for this document.
[3] This paper has not been published so there is no link. Contact the author at luis.crouch@gmail.com.

Achieving at least minimum proficiency levels of foundational learning, as defined by the Global Proficiency Framework and measured by SDG 4.1.1(a) is an attainable goal, even in low resource contexts and in conflict and crisis-affected contexts. However, achieving these learning levels will require new approaches to education sector development, along with strong commitment, focus, and coordination between governments and donors. This is especially true given the need to recover and accelerate learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of the pandemic will be felt the most by marginalized populations such as the disabled, refugees, and the poorest, especially the many families that do not have access to online instruction or learning materials in their homes, and they will need additional support to address COVID-related learning loss.

To reach this goal, coordination is needed at global, regional, and country levels. Existing mechanisms such as the Global Education Forum; *CONFEMEN* (francophone education ministries), and Local Education Groups will need to consider technical sub-groups dedicated to foundational learning. Donors will need to increase transparency around the development aid they provide, and be willing to shape their interventions according to evidence. They will also need more of a focus on sustainability and integration into government structures than has been the case to date.

With the timeline for action on the SDGs narrowing, the GEF is well-positioned to champion the emerging prioritization of foundational learning across the multilaterals, bilaterals, foundations, and INGOs in support of governments. By looking at just a few of the larger agencies, it is clear that some prioritization is emerging, but it must be coordinated in order to maximize its impact and accelerate progress. This is an incomplete list of some of the key initiatives:

- UNICEF's flagship Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Initiative offers an approach to facilitate better results in foundational learning, with a special focus on evidence-based approaches which are likely to lead to lasting changes on teaching and learning.

- The UK is using its G7 presidency to advocate for greater alignment to address the historic disruption that the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought on education. This includes advocating for a G7 commitment to get more girls reading by age 10 in low and middle-income countries.

- USAID has long championed improving foundational skills, with a particular emphasis on early grade reading and literacy, as described in its Reading Matters framework.

- With its replenishment campaign underway, one of the GPE's three strategic goals is about improved and more equitable learning outcomes (GPE, 2020).

- The World Bank has launched its Learning Target to at least halve Learning Poverty in low- and middle-income countries by 2030. This is being operationalized through several initiatives, including the Literacy Policy Package and Accelerator program. The new Accelerator initiative with UNICEF focuses on a few selected countries that are demonstrating political commitment to measure and monitor improvement in foundational skills. This effort also benefits from some global coordination with FCDO, USAID, GPE, UIS, and BMGF.

- The Gates Foundation education strategy focuses on foundational learning; key initiatives include the Science of Teaching how-to guides on structured pedagogy; further how-to guides due soon on assessment informed instruction.

The state of foundational learning: Low learning levels and high inefficiencies

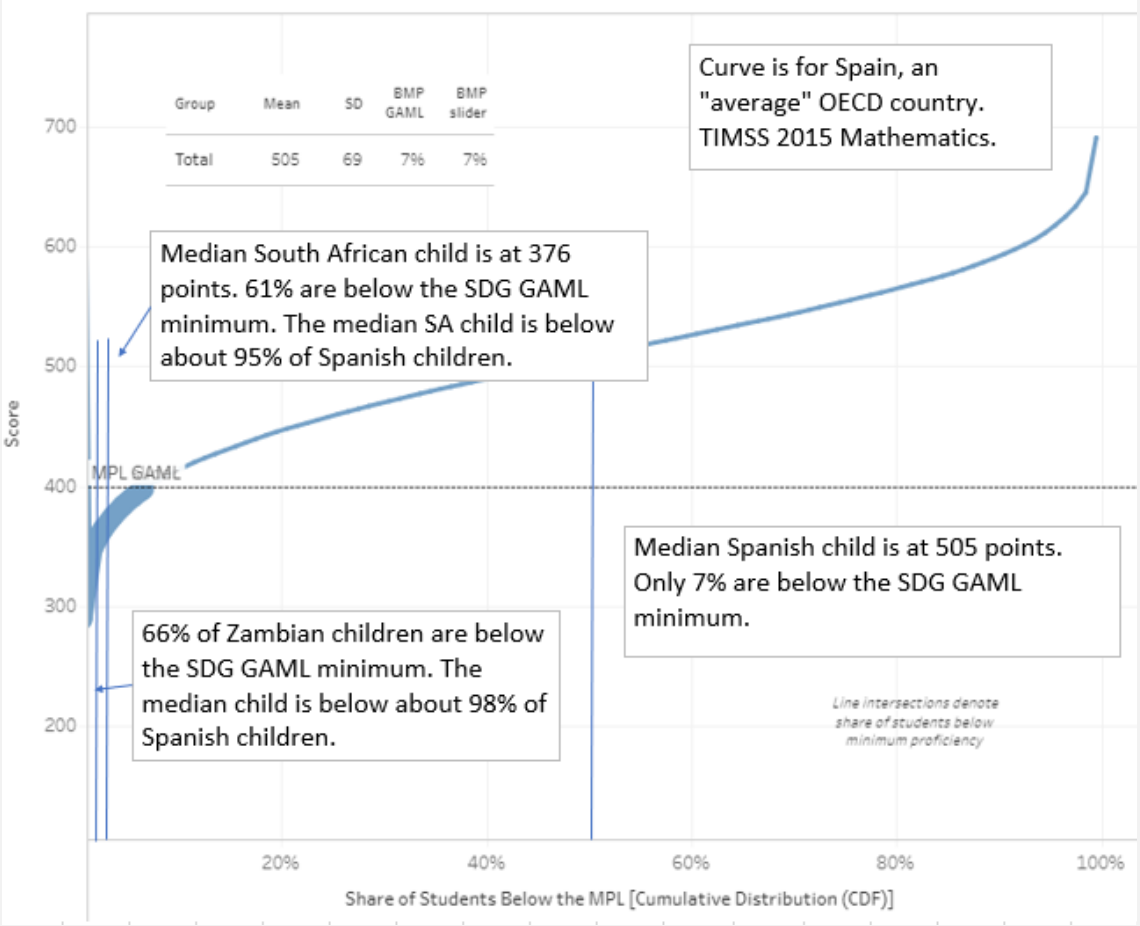
Many lower-income countries do not participate in rigorously benchmarked regional or international assessments such as PISA and TIMSS and unfortunately do not yet have their own rigorous national assessments. However, extrapolating from the countries that do (which are often relatively higher income), scholars have estimated that median children in low-income countries perform at about the level of children at the 3rd to 5th percentile of OECD countries.[4] That is, the median child in low-income countries is 45 percentiles below the median in the OECD. When education systems fail to equip children with both conceptual understanding and procedural mastery of foundational skills in their early schooling, this lack of learning contributes to excessive repetition, which contributes to dropout. In some countries, repetition rates are so high that effort made, by the system and the parents, per primary school completer, are double what they should be.

Most observers and even donor and government participants in the education sector do not realize how dire and deep the learning problem is. A comparison, rendered graphically below, between Spain, a country almost exactly in the middle of the OECD, can be made with South Africa (a low performing but middle-income country) and Zambia. The average South African and Zambian child would be learning less than roughly 95% and 98% of Spanish children, respectively.[5] These children will complete primary school performing 3 to 4 grades behind their counterparts in the OECD, if not more, if they complete at all. In many low-income countries, 40-50% of students will not complete primary school or continue to secondary school due to high levels of repetition, dropout, and frustration with low learning levels, which are felt by children, parents, and communities. In Burkina Faso, Madagascar, and Ethiopia, the completion rate averages to 60% but that "requires" a gross enrollment of 110%, yielding an approximate efficiency of only 55%.[6] Yet despite that cost, only 12% or so of children achieve the SDG4 minimum level (World Bank, 2019). It is ultimately the combination of low learning and low completion, at a high effort cost, that produce what the World Bank calls learning poverty. In Burkina Faso, Madagascar, and Ethiopia, the completion rate averages to 60% but that "requires" a gross enrollment of 110%, yielding an approximate efficiency of only 55%, or 80% more system effort than should be required.[7] Yet despite that effort, only 12% or so of children achieve the SDG4 minimum level (World Bank, 2019).

[4] Calculations made for this report. See also live data here.
[5] Graphic and source data below.
[6] Data sought for this project, EdStats.
[7] Data sought for this project, EdStats.

These problems start in the foundational grades of primary school. In Spain, close to 100% of children learn to read words in the foundational grades; i.e. close to 0% are complete non-readers. In Zambia, across a sample of seven Zambian languages, 65% of children are complete non-readers; i.e. they could not read a single word of a second grade level text [(USAID Early Grade Reading Barometer).]

Figure 1. Depth of learning crisis using TIMSS 2015 as a proxy



*Base graph is embedded [here] in a blog by Silvia Montoya of UIS and Joao Azevedo of the World Bank. Further elaboration was added by the authors. The Zambia case is extrapolated using SACMEQ with South Africa as a link. Almost needless to say, this is only a heuristic.

Building back better: Improving foundational learning

This section proposes four key ways in which the global community can work together to improve foundational learning.

1. Prioritize foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), supporting the development and implementation of tightly aligned, evidence-based packages of interventions

Over the past fifteen years, reform programs around the world have demonstrated that improving student learning outcomes is feasible at a manageable cost, *if* education systems prioritize foundational learning goals and enact reforms and interventions aligned with children's learning levels, aimed at achieving clearly defined learning goals, and designed and implemented in a contextually appropriate way (Hwa et al., 2020; USAID, 2019).

Reforms must coherently address students' needs with assessments that determine student learning levels, track progress towards milestones, and support teachers to improve their practices (see further discussion on data below); relevant teacher training and ongoing support; books and teacher's guides; a language of instruction that both teachers and students know; and sufficient time for instruction and practice. All efforts at changing instructional practices should be designed iteratively to address the problems and constraints in a particular context, and be reviewed and adapted based on outcomes. Improving learning is a long-term effort; systemic, sustained change will take longer than the five-year funding cycles common to many donor projects.

As we reopen school systems and look forward to restarting education, now is the time to increase the efficacy of education spending and prioritize FLN in grades 1-3. In some contexts, the FLN focus could extend to students in upper primary grades who have not mastered basic reading and math. In the face of the pandemic, it is especially critical that the most effective instructional approaches available be widely used to accelerate learning. The Save Our Future White Paper (2020) and many researchers have highlighted that students returning to school will need targeted instruction, based on realistic curricula that correspond to students' needs, and guided by simple classroom assessments to ensure "teaching at the right level," to mitigate learning loss (Banerji 2020, Canto et al, 2020; Kaffenberger, 2021).

The current challenge for governments and donors is to commit to improving learning outcomes, building on lessons learned from the successes and failures of the past decade. It is time to discard interventions that do not work (such as cascade teacher training focused on pedagogical theories), strengthen promising approaches that have been difficult to implement at scale (teacher coaching), and develop innovative solutions to problems that have so far been intractable (ensuring consistent supplies of teacher's guides for every teacher, textbooks for every subject for every student, and materials for reading practice to students and classrooms). After more than ten years of experimentation by a diverse group of organizations, agencies, and

governments, the education community now has substantial research and evidence describing required activities and promising approaches to implementation at scale.

This will require focus, commitment, and accountability from development partners, civil society, and governments. Given resource constraints in the sector and the impact of COVID-19 on the global economy, hard decisions will need to be made to move financing from ineffective activities to those that produce results.

An essential ingredient: Political will

A critical and often overlooked factor in successful education reforms is coherent, credible delegation (from Ministry to schools) of learning results as a system priority, sometimes thought of as "political will". Delegation is coherent and credible when it is backed up by adequate financing, scaffolded by adequate support, and monitored with relevant information and metrics (Pritchett, 2015).

Education systems that have achieved large learning gains typically share common themes: strong political will, consistent commitment of leaders at all levels – school, district, regional and national – to improve learning outcomes, and alignment around a common purpose (Kaffenberger, 2020). Studies of middle-income countries that outperform their peers (Vietnam, for example) find that a national "all in for learning" attitude that pervades every level of the system is a critical factor in the sustained, high performance of the system (London, 2020).

Political will is subjective and difficult to assess. All politicians advocate for better education, but few use their political capital to support difficult reforms. In places where it exists, the international community should do all that it can to champion those efforts through funding and technical support. Success stories will have a demonstration effect, inspiring more countries to take up the challenge.

Under the World Bank and UNICEF's Accelerator program, a relatively small number of governments are being recognized for their political commitment to improve foundational skills, which is reflected by: 1) establishing easy to understand learning targets (Crouch, 2020), 2) implementing communications campaigns to inform and engage the general public and stakeholders about the targets, and 3) supporting the implementation of high impact foundational learning activities. This commitment can be complemented by high-level political champions - at least a Minister of Education but hopefully also a Minister of Finance, Prime Minister, or President – who are willing to advocate for these goals, delegate actions supporting them to the rest of the system, and hold themselves and their donors accountable.

In places where political commitment does not exist, encouragement from donors to prioritize learning can play a role in mobilizing governments to act. Speaking with one voice, donors can advocate for the importance of foundational learning, and can lift up, without dominating, domestic coalitions. Civil society coalitions and research institutions can play an important role in mobilizing reform as well; domestic coalitions played an important role in the recent adoption of a National Mission for Foundational Skills in India. Civil society is most effective when it is driven by local participation and less impactful when induced by international donors or dominated by their

objectives (Mansuir and Roa, 2013, cited in Bano and Oberoi, 2020). A recent study of Pratham, a successful NGO in India, found that its ability to absorb international support without becoming subordinate to an international agenda has been critical to its success (Bano and Oberoi, 2020). Donors can support without dominating by allowing domestic organizations to set their own agendas for policy and action.

Donors can also support and sustain national efforts to develop and track learning targets. A robust system for tracking learning outcomes in Brazil at the state and later municipal level was a factor in the improvements in national education outcomes in the 2010s, and built momentum for successful reform efforts in the district of Sobral and state of Ceara (Bruns et al, 2015, Crouch, 2020). Studies of the successful reform effort in Ecuador in the late 2010s found that measurement of education outcomes played a critical role in helping the president build and sustain political momentum for the reforms (Bruns et al, 2018).

Aligning instruction to children's learning needs

"Structured pedagogy," defined as a ***carefully designed and tightly aligned*** package of interventions to improve classroom teaching and student learning has been shown to significantly improve student learning outcomes in a wide range of countries and regions, including Sobral/Ceará (Brazil), Kenya, and Puebla, (Mexico) (Crouch, 2020). "Methods for teaching at the right level" have also shown results, with an approach based on using simple assessments to group children and provide instruction according to their learning needs, with corresponding simplified learning materials. Details of programs differ across contexts, but effective instructional programs include:

- **Teacher training and support (coaching).** Effective teacher training programs include reinforcement of content knowledge, explicit instruction in evidence-based pedagogical approaches, and practice with students. Teacher training may also include literacy development in the language of instruction that the teacher will be using. Effective, sustainable coaching programs work with existing education sector personnel, trained to provide support to classroom teachers. Specific consideration should be given to supporting teachers who may not be considered part of national systems, such as many in refugee-hosting and community-supported schools.

- **Carefully designed teacher's guides, textbooks, and books for reading practice at "the right level" and in languages students and teachers know.** Teacher's guides provide daily lesson plans for teachers. The lesson plans focus on the essential skills of reading and mathematics, and are at varying levels of specificity, depending on the context. Every teacher needs a teacher's guide for reading and a teacher's guide for mathematics. Student textbooks include student materials for instruction and practice. Every student needs a textbook for reading and math. Sufficient quantities should be provided so that students can take their books home for practice. Books for reading practice should include decodable and leveled readers, which may be combined in an anthology to facilitate distribution and management. In the lowest income countries, stationery supplies are key. All materials need to be provided consistently and in sufficient

quantities. Strengthening book supply chains and the widespread creation and use of open licensed materials through existing coalitions and platforms such as the Global Book Alliance and African Storybook/Pratham's Storyweaver/the Global Digital Library will reduce book costs and increase availability.

- **Sufficient time for instruction and practice.** A lack of instructional time is one of the most common reasons that students fail to attain instructional objectives. Successful reading and math instruction requires at least an hour of effective instructional time per day, with additional time for practice at school and home. Students who come to school with lower levels of pre-reading skills (oral language in particular) will need additional instructional time to reach learning goals.

- **The use of a language of instruction that students know.** The learning crisis is in large part a language crisis, as almost 40% of children around the world are taught in a language they do not know when they come to school. Foundational reading skills are built on oral language abilities and so students learn to read much more effectively in a language that they know (Alidou et al., 2006; Nag et al., 2014; Walter, 2011). Starting in languages students know also makes it easier for students to learn other languages, once they have mastered key reading skills. Appropriate language of instruction policies improve learning, access, equity, retention, and inclusion (World Bank, 2019).

- **Simple, formative assessment** that allows teachers to determine when students are progressing and when constructive feedback or re-teaching is required. The most important assessments in any education system are the daily assessments conducted by classroom teachers. Teachers use assessment to determine when students are progressing and when review and re-teaching are required. Most of these assessments will only take a few minutes and will be conducted during lessons. More structured assessments are given at the end of chapters or units and should be reviewed by teachers and school directors to determine what adjustments in instruction are needed for student success.

Successful instructional programs also include strategies for parent and community engagement. Social marketing strategies focused on the importance of reading and using languages children know are key to parental and community acceptance of the use of local languages for instruction. Parents can be supported to understand the importance of talking with children to develop their oral language abilities (Hoff, 2013; Roy & Chiat, 2013), engage in a host of developmentally appropriate activities with their children, and to read with children to support their emerging reading skills. Community facilitators can provide additional support to teachers for differentiated instructional programs (Duflo et al., 2020; J-PAL, 2006) in language-diverse classrooms and facilitate the close ties among schools, families, and communities that are critical for student achievement (Deforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Naylor et al., 2019).

Implementing instruction that improves learning

For structured pedagogy programs to be effective, scalable and sustainable, they must become core programs of the Ministry of Education, embedded in the appropriate technical units, with coordination across activities at the level of the primary education department or directorate. They cannot be add-on activities, separate programs, or after school activities. ***Using approaches that are designed for existing capacity***, valuing the technical and contextual knowledge and experience that government personnel bring to program design, ensuring that the technical support the sector needs is always focused on transferring knowledge and skills, and working in partnership will increase the likelihood that these core education sector activities will be prioritized in the long term.

Implementation context and existing capacity should drive instructional design. In countries with large class sizes, whole class teaching is likely to be necessary. In countries where most teachers use copying and memorization as their central teaching strategy, providing an extensive menu of complex classroom activities that require unavailable materials is unlikely to improve instruction.

Four key points need to be considered by governments and development partners with regards to investments in foundational learning *in the immediate term*:

- The implementation *at scale* of key instructional interventions in the immediate term, can only be built on *existing* implementation capacity.
- Interventions must, except in some cases, be affordable with *existing* overall budget envelops, with potential reallocation within education budgets.
- Implementation of all interventions in the instructional package must be well-coordinated, so that teachers have the training, support, materials, and assessment tools that they need to be effective.

Every intervention should be adapted to support all children, including the most marginalized

Every school environment should be safe, ready, and welcoming for all children. There are a range of supportive approaches to instruction for children who need additional assistance. These children will vary by context. Gender considerations and support for children with disabilities should be integrated into every activity. Refugees or displaced children may need additional support, as well as those from ethnic minority groups.

2. Collect data to measure the global learning crisis, improve learning, and report on progress

Broadly speaking, two types of data are important to improve foundational learning. Donors should support efforts to collect and use these data through coordinated funding.

The two key types are:

1. Data to support teachers and systems to improve instruction.

2. Data to track and report on progress and equity locally and globally.

Note that:

- These two types of data are fundamentally different, and donors and countries need both.

- Both types are important, but they do not need the same kind of support. Collecting and using data for tracking and reporting, especially at a global level, requires less technical innovation (thanks to excellent prior and ongoing work) than collecting and using data for improving teaching and learning. Data for reporting requires more complex psychometric skills, especially to ensure validity, not just reliability.

- Methods for collecting data for reporting are known, there are plenty of excellent use cases, and the non-profits, research institutes, and regional UN and other bodies have sufficient capacity to lead and deliver. Data collection and use may need some financial support in the poorest countries, and there are some global public goods still needed (such as methods to link assessments and item banks). In addition, more attention needs to be paid to the collection of data regarding refugees and other marginalized populations.

- For data to support instructional improvement, far more realistic and cost-effective options still need to be developed, trialed, and implemented at scale.

- The skills needed to collect and use the two types of data are very different. For data for instruction, understanding "pedagogical content knowledge" (Shulman, 1986) (e.g. how children learn reading and mathematics) is key to assessment design.

- Finally, while these types of data are dichotomized here, they exist on a spectrum, where they and their uses are not entirely distinct. Countries need sustained, integrated assessment approaches that they own, can implement, and can use to improve instruction and to report, not a host of assessments sponsored by different funders.

- Assessments tools for "assessment for learning," needed at teacher and coach level and designed to be frequently implemented at very low cost, should be implementable via existing capacity. More periodic assessments for global reporting may have to rely on external technical assistance and the gradual strengthening of local capacity.

- Specific approaches are needed to ensure the inclusion of refugees and other groups who may currently not be a part of national assessments, to understand their learning levels and ensure inclusion in national planning.

Data to improve learning

The purpose of these data is to improve teaching to improve learning. Assessments for data collection should be integrated in evidenced-based plans for foundational learning expansion and aligned with the type of instructional program discussed in the previous section. Lessons from the last decade and a half show that data used for reporting and accountability do not improve classroom instruction. In developing tools to collect this data, it is conceptually easiest to start from the middle of the teaching-learning-tracking-reporting spectrum described above. For instance, if a simple assessment tool such as ASER or the MICS learning module tools is used to track progress and report nationally or by province, then the contents of teacher and coach assessment tools can be linked to that: Are children learning their letters on time? Can they count? Are they moving on to reading words? Have they started to make the leap from skip counting to multiplication? These tools require sufficient knowledge of how children learn reading and mathematics, contextualized based on the national curriculum, while recognizing that most national curricula have tended to converge over the past few decades.

Note that because these data do not require, and cannot support, systematic random sampling, they cannot be used for measuring and tracking national (much less global) inequality and patterns of learning poverty. In addition, we do not know how refugee children are faring since these data are not disaggregated by protection status, so our understanding of the learning outcomes of refugee children is still very limited.

Data to track and report on progress

Data are needed to:

1. Measure and highlight the level and urgency of the learning crisis

2. Set global targets, support countries in setting national targets, and measure progress against these, and track country-level inequality between regions, income groups, and, most importantly, random inequality due to unevenness of teaching methods.

Both pivot on SDG 4.1.1. The development of SDG 4.1.1 (a) and (b) was based on more than a decade of efforts to measure and mitigate the learning crisis. Civil-society led assessments such as ASER and Uwezo, along with development partner-led assessment efforts such as the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), produced learning data for the early grades in more than 100 countries and created global awareness of the learning crisis. In 2021, the key task is to harmonize measurement approaches and reporting strategies in order to ensure that countries report on these indicators and use the data to track their efforts to improve learning. Additional proposed targets, such as the World Bank's Learning Poverty target and FCDO's girls' education target should be seen as complementing work on the SDG; not competing with it. Reinforcing efforts to improve foundational learning, whether measured at the end of second grade, at age 10, or for girls, will create stronger programs and more political commitment.

Countries can be encouraged to use their own measurement efforts in this regard, though ideally there should be a way to link to global reporting standards as determined by SDG4 processes. They can be supported in various means of what UIS calls "policy linking." As countries continue to underestimate the scale of their own learning crises (CGD, forthcoming), this work must be ongoing. Countries must conduct high quality learning assessments regularly to track their progress on foundational learning goals and use this information to build political commitment, allocate funding and improve instruction and donors must strengthen national assessment systems in context-appropriate ways, designed for existing capacity as much as possible, as a central part of their support to education and commitment to monitoring progress towards the learning goals.

In both types of data (learning and reporting), and many countries, civil society organizations could play a major role in using simple assessment tools to draw attention to learning levels. Civil society organizations are well positioned to put (and keep) foundational learning at the top of national development priorities through 1) supporting schools and teachers' return to schools; 2) explaining current learning levels to parents and engaging parents in supporting children's learning; and 3) advocating for foundational learning at the school, district, and national levels to build political commitment to improving learning.

Coordination of the multiple efforts in this area is ongoing, through initiatives such as the Global Proficiency Framework and the UNESCO item bank and should be prioritized. Although different agencies may seem to be producing different indicators and approaches (e.g., official agencies such as UIS and the World Bank, civil society organizations such as the PAL Network), these are largely intellectually and technically coherent and reinforce each other. However, donor leadership needs to continue to demand coherence and collaboration from their own and from other institutions, to ensure efforts do not diverge.

3. Ensure adequate funding for universal access to high quality foundational learning at scale

Ensuring that all children acquire foundational skills in literacy and numeracy by the end of second or third grade is an equity issue. Children who do not acquire conceptual and procedural mastery of these skills early are more likely to repeat grades and to drop out of school. Children who master the basics early are well-prepared to move from a curriculum focused on "learning to read" in the early grades to one focused on "reading to learn" in the upper primary grades, when they must master the more complex comprehension strategies, they will need to learn in the content areas.

In lower income countries, around 46% of educational resources are used for the children that are already the most educated, and the ratio of expenditure on the richest children to the poorest in a sample of countries was 10 to 1 (UNICEF, 2015). So, although, in most countries, sufficient overall funding exists to improve foundational learning to achieve minimum proficiency levels, spending allocations are inefficient and inequitable. Higher teacher salaries for upper grade teachers, overly costly and slow textbook procurement, and continued spending on teacher training strategies that have little impact on teacher practice are common pitfalls. Reallocating

spending to interventions that work and ensuring that spending on each one is as cost-effective as possible will, in most cases, make it possible to implement foundational learning as a core, equity-enhancing government priority.

In some countries, however, the financing available to the education sector (government and development partner) and/or the financing available to primary education may be insufficient to provide these basic inputs. In those cases, reallocation across departments or education levels may be necessary.

Getting ministries to rebalance spending and align spending decisions effectively is also key. It is not an uncommon to visit district offices with plenty of teacher coaches who have motor bikes, but who cannot visit schools to help teachers because they lack fuel, and fuel budget decisions are not delegated to the district level. Other countries may put money into lowering the pupil-teacher ratio even if there are no books in classrooms. Or spend a lot on testing but not on using the results for teacher support.

In other cases, total spending can be a limitation, and tightly limited budgets do constrain re-balancing. In order to improve funding allocations and overall funding availability, development partners may consider incentivizing reallocations through grants or other mechanisms focused on foundational learning priorities; reducing the debt burden and related fiscal constraints; reporting on SDG 4.1.1. can also serve as an accountability mechanism.

Further analysis is needed to formulate more detailed recommendations in this area. As general framing considerations three observations should be noted. (1) The median education expenditure as a share of GDP, and primary expenditure as a share of total education expenditure, in the poorest 40 countries in the world, are at 4.3% and 49.3% respectively. This could be sufficient to fund foundational learning, and is in line with standard recommendations, all other things being equal. But (2) all other things are most definitely *not* equal: the bottom quartile of the poorest countries spend 2.7% and 40.8% respectively, amounts clearly insufficient and far below recommendations.[8] Finally, (3) the share of education in GDP is strongly driven by the tax take as a share of GDP. Taken together these observations suggest two important points to consider in tackling this question. First, the relationship between share of education spending in GDP and overall tax incidence needs to be taken into consideration in deciding whether the policy dialogue is with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance equally, or really mostly the latter if tax take is just too low. Second, the fact that there is such extreme variability even *among the poorest countries* suggests that it may be more foolish than useful to make generalized recommendations beyond the broadly indicative. Real progress hinges on highly country-specific analyses.

Lastly, ensuring universal access to high quality foundational learning, requires that no child or youth be left behind. This means that efforts must reach the most marginalized children and youth, including refugees. The WB and UNHCR have recently estimated that the cohort-average

[8] Original work done for this note.

annual cost of providing education to all refugee students in low, lower-middle and upper-middle income host countries is 4.85 billion USD (World Bank & UNHCR, 2021).

4. Increase the impact of development partner investment in education

As noted, in some countries the education sector has long faced a significant funding gap. This is only increasing as public budgets decline due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Education Finance Watch, 2021). It is unlikely that the total amount of external funding will increase in the short or even medium term, even if the proportion of funding flows to bilaterals versus multilaterals changes.

There is no substitute to fine-grained coordination at the country level. Focusing on the core interventions described above and by many others, development partners and country counterparts should work together to determine which activities are functioning well, and which need additional support, and then determine how the funding and support will be provided on a long-term, integrated basis. Prioritizing foundational learning means that less funding will be available for other activities; choices will have to be made. Innovative procurement approaches to funding key inputs, such as textbooks, that draw on health sector experience and could greatly reduce costs have been discussed by many development partners (UNESCO, 2016; R4D, 2016) and the Global Book Alliance, but have yet to be widely implemented. Funding flow studies will clarify how funding moves from the central level to the classroom and used to advocate for increased child-level funding.

A review of country coordination mechanisms and the effectiveness of pooled financing would allow government and development partners to develop better strategies for coordination. However, pooled funding and coordination is not a substitute for carefully designed and implemented interventions, monitored and iteratively improved through baseline, midline, and endline assessment. Country accountability and effective development partner technical support in improving intervention quality, implementation strategies, and measuring progress will be required to address the learning crisis.

Proposals for consideration by the Global Education Forum

To address the critical need for progress on foundational learning (mastery of basic literacy and numeracy in grades 1-3), two sets of proposals, one for action and the other for coordination, each containing three specific recommendations, are below for the GEF's consideration. "Coordination and action" are the two core tenets of the Global Education Forum's mission, and since actions are what needs to be coordinated the Action recommendation come first, followed by the coordination recommendations.

The above paper provides a detailed rationale for the focus on foundational learning. In summary: The breadth of the learning crisis is known. More than half of children in low-income countries do not master basic reading and math/reach SDG minimum proficiency targets by age 10. However, the depth of the crisis is not often noted in two senses. First, *the average child in low-income countries learns less than 95% of children in a typical OECD country*. This is inter- and intra-national inequality that is morally intolerable and economically ruinous. Second, this inequality originates in a failure of educations systems to enable the world's poorest children to achieve mastery of key competencies in the foundational grades (grades 1, 2, and 3) and to succeed in the higher grades. Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of various partners in the GEF over the past ten years, there are many experiences to learn from and capitalize on. Proposals to prioritize foundational learning do not imply that other areas should be neglected.
However, foundational learning is a necessary condition for achieving educational and economic goals, and so leadership, creativity, focus, and drive need to focus on this critical SDG goal.

1. Action: Support foundational learning efforts with planning, funding, technical assistance, and policy dialogue

- **Support planning - By December 2021, as an initial effort, have pledged and started to support to at least five committed countries in developing clear, prioritized, costed, and evidence-based plans for foundational learning** (aligned around clear learning targets, adapted appropriately to context, and anchored in government systems). These should incorporate the lessons of the past ten years as outlined in this Action Memo and be broadly consistent with various agency documents (USAID's Reading Matters, UNICEF's FLN initiative, the World Bank's Literacy Policy Package, GEEAP's "Smart Buys," etc.) and include evidence-based interventions: teacher training and support; teachers' guides, textbooks, and books for reading practice; sufficient time for instruction and practice; the use of a language of instruction that students know; and assessment that allows teachers to determine students' initial learning levels, progress and when re-teaching is required. All of this must be aligned with the learning needs of children; and implemented in a tightly integrated and coordinated manner. Consideration should be taken to reach the most marginalized children, including refugees, who are outside of

national systems. Building on this initial effort, the ambition should be scaled rapidly to include all countries with significant learning poverty.

- **Fund together – Within a year, fund at least five countries to implement the foundational learning plans and develop a coordinated support strategy (including multilateral platforms or coordinated country-level funding efforts) to mobilize additional funding for foundational learning.** In some countries this can be done by re-purposing existing inputs. In others, spending may need to increase. How to sort out whether increases are needed or whether re-purposing is sufficient should be part of the foundational learning planning process recommended above. Funding efforts could include support to multi-agency efforts to conduct unified regular public expenditure reviews of education and funding flow studies (with a strong focus on foundational learning) and proposing actions for mid- to long-term financing plans to address identified financing gaps for foundational learning. **Again, building on this initial effort, the ambition should be scaled to ensure that countries with the plans and political commitment to improve foundational learning receive adequate and coordinated international support to meet their objectives.**

- **Measure impact - Ensure that every foundational learning intervention has an evaluation and learning strategy that includes assessment of baseline, midline, and endline outcomes**. Ensure that this measurement is consistent with data efforts below, the formative assessments noted in evidence-based interventions, and is shared publicly. Without this it will be impossible to do the timely tracking needed as proposed below.

2. Identify effective ways to coordinate actions, take stock, and hold each other mutually accountable for progress

- **Be intentional about coordination – GEF members should identify specific strategies and mechanisms to ensure more effective coordination at three levels:** (1) between headquarters and field offices, (2) between partners and with the country at the country level and (3) between donors at global level (e.g. in developing global public goods and funding mechanisms).

- **Track progress - Develop a "tracking tool" and track progress on coordination of efforts in support of foundational learning (including strategies identified in the above).** Commit to take stock regularly of outcomes, commitments, funding, and actions of GEF members on foundational learning. This will allow the identification of opportunities to create and use global public goods and develop country-specific actions that are currently un- or under-supported by the education community. Review progress against the tracking tool every six months through the GEF process. Review progress in the participating countries with greatest need. Develop specific tools for populations such as refugees who are not included in government systems, and use the work on foundational learning to advocate for their inclusion.

- **By September 2021, GEF members to support development of the tracking tool** and incorporate by reference the evidence-based interventions listed above.

- **By the one year, GEF members to support a foundational learning stock take report highlighting where progress has been made and where it is stalling** and a list of countries that could be supported to develop foundational learning plans.

- **Coordinate efforts on data collection, analysis and use of data. Identify options to jointly support the collection, analysis, and use of open data for measuring and reporting on learning for SDG 4.1.1.a and b, as a means to spur action and track progress on foundational learning:**

    - This includes supporting government and civil society institutions that are innovating and trialing methods at the national and global level for data collection, use, and dissemination. Effort should be taken to understand how marginalized learners, and specifically refugees who are not included in national systems, are performing and feed these findings into reporting.

    - GEF members may wish to consider the establishment of a fund or brokerage for financing learning data collection and analysis, to ensure countries have tools to set their own goals and track their own progress, and to report learning levels globally. The recent establishment of the Global Proficiency Framework should enable multiple routes to this shared goal. Intellectual coherence with the measurement approaches listed above will be maintained and supported via the GEF. These improved data will come with a lag, even after systems are improved, so the data to be used for initial monitoring will have to be gathered opportunistically for the specific countries concerned. No new reporting is implied here, beyond current SDG4.1 methodology and reporting processes.

Annex 1

Costing and financing considerations

Two recent initiatives have attempted to estimate costs for achieving foundational learning at global levels with different assumptions.

Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) – Costing Estimates to Achieve SDG4 Headline Targets

The Global Education Monitoring Report team estimated the cost of achieving the headline SDG 4 targets, that is, ensuring universal pre-primary, primary and secondary education by 2030 in low- and lower-middle-income countries. The financing gap is calculated by subtracting estimated public spending from total costs. See: UNESCO (2020). Act Now: Reduce the impact of COVID-19 on the cost of achieving SDG4. Policy Paper 42. September 2020.

		All countries	Low income	Lower middle income
Total cost, US$ billion	Pre-primary	30.2	5.9	24.3
	Primary	137.5	25.1	112.4
Total cost, % GDP	Pre-primary	0.5%	0.7%	0.4%
	Primary	2.6%	3.5%	1.9%
Financing gap, bn US$	Pre-primary	10.0	4.3	5.7
	Primary	14.7	9.2	5.4
Financing gap, % GDP	Pre-primary	0.4%	0.6%	0.2%
	Primary	0.8%	1.6%	0.2%

ONE Campaign (2021) - Cost Estimates to Close the Learning Poverty Gap

The Lost Potential Tracker initiative developed a costing methodology to find how much a given amount of financing could 'move the dial' in terms of the number of children able to read by age 10. This doesn't extend to the total financing required to eradicate learning poverty, principally due to the significant changes that a country, particularly those currently lower income, would undergo whilst transitioning to this context of zero learning poverty. The model builds on the method used in the GPE's '*Methodology for the Replenishment Indicators*' (GPE, 2020).

The model estimates the unit cost at current efficiency levels of spending to move a child from the binary zero, not being able to read, to one, being able to read. This can be adapted based on different assumptions.

Unit cost, US$	Low-Income Countries	Lower-Middle -Income Countries	Upper-Middle-Income Countries	High-income countries
Additional cost per child with adjusted proficiency (with full efficiency and targeting learning poor only at their average distance from being able to read)	694	934	3283	22602
Learning Poverty Rate	89.88%	55.09%	28.96%	8.69%