2021 PAL Network Conference Declaration

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BUILDING BETTER: ENSURING LEARNING CONTINUITY FOR ALL

November 2nd– 4th | Virtual

ASER BANGLADESH

ASER — Evidence for Action

ASER NEPAL

ASER PAKISTAN

Beekunko

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LEARNigeria

Medición Independiente de Aprendizajes

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Zizi Afrique Foundation

INTRODUCTION

The People's Action for Learning (PAL) Network is a south-south partnership of 15 organisations working across three continents to assess the basic reading and numeracy competencies of children. Through citizen-led assessments, it provides inclusive and equitable visible data to inform citizen-led action for improving learning for ALL children.

The PAL Network holds a biennial international conference inviting researchers, practitioners, policymakers, academicians, and civil-society actors to discuss progress, challenges, and opportunities related to children's foundational learning. ASER Pakistan and ASER Nepal hosted PAL Network's first biennial international conference in Kathmandu, Nepal in 2019. The conference titled, "Ensuring All Children Learn: Lessons on Equity and Inclusion in the South" hosted 160 participants from 22 countries

The Kathmandu Declaration 2019, adopted at the first PAL Network conference and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal4 (SDG4), committed to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all.

THE 2021 CONFERENCE

The 2021 conference was co-hosted by Uwezo Tanzania, Facilidade Mozambique and the East and Southern African Hub (ESA) of the PAL Network. Themed "Building Better: Ensuring Learning Continuity for All", the conference was held virtually from 2nd to 4th November 2021 at a time when all countries were striving to regain stability in their educational institutions after prolonged school closures due to COVID-19. Over 500 participants from 40 countries participated in the conference. The conference addressed four sub-themes: Children's learning and their well-being; Language, culture, and learning; Systems, learning, and technology; and Scaling and the role of partnerships.

Three keynotes, 17 conference papers and two panels highlighted the effects of COVID-19 on primary education. These included poor foundational skills, learning losses, and challenges to children's mental health; as well as widening equity gaps in the access of learning materials and education, particularly amongst the most vulnerable, girls, displaced children, and children with disabilities.

The papers effectively captured the positive parental engagement in children's education, in particular that of the mothers. Although play-based activities at home can provide low-cost solutions, gaps remain in the parental capacity to engage children using appropriate early years pedagogy. In addition, mothers with literacy challenges are unable to support children to improve their reading skills.

It was reported that digital technology influenced self and peer-to-peer learning. However, it was necessary to factor in local context and access to digital devices in order to provide effective home and community learning solutions. Accessibility to tech devices, and a good quality internet connectivity remains a major challenge for the vulnerable children, especially for girls and children in remote rural places. This widens the inequality gap in learning.

Partnerships amongst CSOs have produced positive dividends in the form of citizen-led Assessments (CLAs) and implementation of accelerated remedial foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) programs, but the COVID-19 crisis has created severe financial constraints in the sustenance and scaling up of the initiatives. As powerfully articulated by the conference keynote speaker HE Dr. Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete-, 'the gap between what we know … and what we do in education lies at the heart of a global learning crisis. The learning crisis demands dramatic and urgent improvement in systems. Despite huge

progress and many important initiatives, the communities of research, policy, and practice are often discon-nected islands of activity making worthy, but uncoordinated, attempts to bridge the gaps. The evidence emerging from civil society organisations on applying and refining interventions is rarely reflected in policy or implementation choices.' In times of such a worldwide pandemic, these gaps need everyone's attention - the learning catastrophe needs urgent and sustained support.

PREAMBLE (Education challenges in a post COVID – 19 world)

Prior to the COVID -19 pandemic, 617 million children and adolescents around the world did not have mini-mum proficiency in basic reading and math; COVID-19 related school closures have deepened the learning crisis further. The World Bank estimates that learning poverty might increase by 17 percentage points, from 53% to 70% in low-and-middle-income countries. UNESCO data reveals that 1.25 billion children were affect-ed by lockdowns with a triple impact on health, education, and income. Global human development, a com-bined measure of the world's education, health and living standards, could decline for the first time since its introduction in 1990.

According to the UIS Data blog, Disruptions to Schooling and the Need for Recovery, a year before COVID-19, the percentage of children considered learning proficient was increasing by two percentage points in many developing countries. In the present day, the school disruptions due to the pandemic have created learning losses which are equal to all the learning gains made over the last two decades. The situation can recover by 2024, but only if exceptional efforts are devoted to the cause through remedial and catch-up strategies.

Prior to COVID-19, the annual financing gap for #SDG4 had already grown to $148billion up to 2030. Coun-tries must act immediately to ensure that the pandemic does not widen the funding gap even further. Governments in low and lower-middle countries must resist pressure to cut education budgets due to difficult fiscal environments. (UNESCO GEM Report social media posts)

Over the past decade we have witnessed a shift from input-driven measures towards children's learning outcomes. Now more than ever, the global education community must come together to ensure continuity of learning for children. COVID-19 disruptions have made our resolve to do so firmer.

The 2021 PAL Network Conference was a forum for evidence-based global debates and sharing of practices on building back systems that are resilient, providing active and caring support to children's learning. Researchers, policy influencers, practitioners, and government agency representatives, donors, and other stakeholders agreed that it was crucial to continue our focus on:

- Redesigning and scaling up of effective remedial and catch-up strategies for foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) to ensure learning continuity and accelerated recovery from learning losses

- Supporting equitable and inclusive learning for ALL children through hybrid approaches

- Producing robust comparable FLN data on learning for targeted actions at scale

- Investing and innovating to improve evidence-informed learning in the early years.

- Conduct research to explore and interrogate how community engagement and parental involvement affect child development and learning outcomes and use the findings to build better systems that can foster quality teaching for improved learning outcomes.

OUR POSITION

We, the People's Action for Learning Network, cognizant of the 260 million children worldwide who are failing to learn basic skills, despite having spent at least four years in school and the 101 million children who moved below the minimum proficiency threshold as a result of the COVID – 19 pandemic:

1. Acknowledge

the efforts of the international education community in drawing attention to the complex and urgent learning needs of a post COVID-19 world especially in low and low-medium income countries.

2. Endorse

citizen-led assessments in households and institutions as an inclusive accountability movement tracking ALL children's learning progress, irrespective of age, gender, class, geography, or schooling status aligned to SDG 4.1 and 4.2, in COVID 19 disrupted education systems.

3. Call

for a Global Compact for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) until every child is learning well.

4. Commit

to remedial and catch-up interventions to attain adequate proficiency level in FLN through accelerated teaching-learning approaches, cognizant of local context and mother tongue-based language proficiency.

5. Pledge

to continue to produce internationally comparable data on FLN through robust and innovative tools mapped to global proficiency standards and common dimensions of equity and inclusion as a Global Public Good.

6. Stand

by all endeavors, at local, national, regional, and global levels   to bridge the learning and

digital divide for ALL children especially the poorest, girls, children with disabilities, and displaced – the most vulnerable groups in COVID and post COVID–19 world.

7. Advocate

for the continued expansion, visualization of disaggregated data to measure learning progress early on, for timely corrective measures to ensure learning gains and successful transitions.

8. Focus

on promoting girls' education to minimize gender inequality in education (SDG 5), which may have widened further by the COVID 19 crisis.

9. Enable and mobilize

Continue to enable and mobilize system supported partnerships between governments, communities, industry, academia, and development organizations/ foundations backed by society, learning and EdTech alliances, to accelerate   actualization of SDG 4 especially 4.1.1(a) by 2030.

10. Our commitment to the world

Continue to advocate for FLN; to adopt and adapt learning solutions that effectively respond to the learning need of each child inclusively and equitably.