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Background: PAL Network and Citizen-Led Assessments

The People's Action for Learning (PAL) Network was formally established in 2015 as a South-South partnership of organisations across three continents engaged in regular citizen-led assessments (CLAs) of children's foundational reading and numeracy. These assessments offer a method for assessing learning outcomes that is grounded in the realities of the Global South. They focus on foundational reading and numeracy skills and are conducted orally, one-on-one with each child, so as not to assume that children can read; they are conducted in households, rather than in schools where not all children are enrolled or attend regularly; and they are simple and quick, in order to encourage the involvement of 'ordinary people' and thus increase the visibility of the problem of poor foundational learning. In many cases, PAL Network member organisations also implement action programs aiming to ensure that all children acquire these foundational skills.

The CLA model was born in India in 2005 when Pratham, one of India's largest NGOs, designed an innovative approach to assessing the foundational reading and numeracy abilities of all children, regardless of their schooling status. This assessment is the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) in India. Over the past 15 years, the ASER tools and approach have been borrowed and adapted by many countries across the Global South. CLAs evolved organically from this approach, spurred by the interest of citizens who understood the importance of obtaining reliable data on children's foundational learning that could build awareness and inform policy and practice.

CLAs are not intended to be an internationally comparable metric of learning; they are nationally relevant snapshots of what children can or cannot do. Each new member to the network retains the core principles underlying CLAs, but adapts the assessment and survey tools to align to the national curriculum framework and measures learning according to their own national standards. Thus, while the approach remains the same, both content and execution of CLAs varies across implementing countries.

However, the development of common global goals for education as reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the need for comparable data to monitor education quality targets has meant that many low- and middle-income countries face increasing pressure to participate in existing international and

regional assessment programs. These learning assessments are based on models and methods that emerged in the context of Global North countries, which have characteristics that are often very different from those of countries in the Global South, including several decades of universal enrolment; comprehensive records of all schools in the country; and significant proportions of parents who are themselves literate and thus better able to support their children's learning. In these education systems, assessment is usually an integral part of the larger teaching-learning framework that guides the schools' functioning, with data on students' progress feeding into decisions and plans for improvements in the education system. Existing international and regional assessments are designed to inform policy makers and education planners, rather than teachers, parents, and other actors on the ground; and they do not generate actionable information at lower levels of performance

where a large proportion of children in the Global South are usually located. This type of evidence is urgently needed by school systems in the Global South. Specifically, measurement of foundational reading and numeracy skills in early primary grades is critical to identify problems and intervene to resolve them early in children's schooling trajectory.

The PAL Network has responded to the need for a comparable, low cost assessment that meets these Global South realities by developing a new assessment tool and making it available in the public domain.

ICAN (International Common Assessment of Numeracy), a simple-to-use and scalable tool that measures children's foundational numeracy, is designed to align to SDG 4.1.1 (a), an indicator for which existing international assessments are not able to generate comparable data. This report highlights the features of ICAN that make it relevant to Global South contexts.

In addition, the report summarises the first large-scale implementation round of ICAN in late 2019 and early 2020, and showcases examples of the kinds of analyses that are facilitated by household-based implementation of ICAN on scale. Achievement of SDG 4.1.1 (a), the most basic of the learning targets established by SDG 4, will require the availability of this type of evidence.