The Citizen-Led Assessment Approach to Measuring Learning

MEETING BRIEF

BACKGROUND
Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) sets bold and ambitious new targets that emphasise the quality and equity of education, building on the previous focus of access. SDG4 requires that ‘no education target should be considered met unless met by all’. To ensure that no child is left behind, active efforts are needed to identify the most disadvantaged children. Identifying these children requires an understanding of where they are most likely to be found.

Across the developing world, the hardest to reach children are often found in the hardest to reach areas, and are not likely to be in school. Even when children are enrolled in school, they may attend irregularly. When children do attend, they may be enrolled in schools that are not government schools, and do not feature in any official records.

DEVELOPING COUNTRY CONTEXTS
Across the developing world, school enrollment levels are high and rising. The assumption has been that sending children to school will automatically lead to learning. This assumption has led to a absence of inclusive learning assessments and interventions to improve children’s learning. In many developing countries, the curiosity and capability of policy makers, practitioners, and parents are often not well developed to understand and improve learning. With a large majority of parents being illiterate themselves, many feel ill-equipped to provide assistance to their children to help them learn. At the policy level, there has been little or no practice of using large-scale evidence on learning outcomes to inform policy, planning or implementation. For many years, governments have focused on measuring and delivering infrastructure and expenditure, and not on learning outcomes.

THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF MEASURING LEARNING
Existing measurements of learning have evolved in developed countries based on their context, needs and capabilities. In most cases, learning is measured in school using pen and paper tests, for children who are already able to read and write. Whilst these types of assessments may be well suited to developed country contexts, in developing countries such models may not be immediately appropriate, relevant or useful.

Today, learning assessments in developing countries have the opportunity to play an important role beyond monitoring the status of the education system, to moving children’s learning to the centre of policy and practice. Learning assessments in developing countries should be able to help policymakers, practitioners and parents to understand the need to look beyond enrolment and attendance to whether children are learning; as well as identifying barriers to learning, and enabling immediate action based on data to improve learning.
CITIZEN-LED ASSESSMENTS
Citizen-led assessments offer a complementary and contextually relevant method of assessing learning outcomes that is grounded in the realities of developing countries where not all children are enrolled in school or attending regularly. The citizen-led assessment model started in India in 2005 with the ‘Annual Status of Education Report’ (ASER). Over the past eleven years, the approach has been borrowed and adapted in a further thirteen countries across three continents. Citizen-led assessments take place in the household, focus on assessing the acquisition of a few basic skills for all children (rather than on subject-wise, grade level outcomes like other assessments), and are conducted orally, one-on-one. This is the only option of assessing a majority of primary school children in developing countries as children who cannot read, cannot do written tests. Citizen-led assessments have made robust contributions to increasing understanding of the learning crisis, and have significantly improved knowledge of the inequalities that persist in educational access and acquisition of foundational reading and numeracy skills.

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS
Since 2015, there have been intensive efforts to design metrics intended to measure and track countries’ progress towards the SDG targets and their respective indicators. Members of the PAL Network have continued to be strong advocates for the inclusion of an indicator that measures learning progress early on (Grade 2 level) in order for timely corrective measures to be taken to ensure better learning gains and successful transitions. PAL Network members believe that citizen-led, household-based assessments are a vital first step in a process to hold national and global-level institutions accountable for delivering on the promises enshrined in SDG4 that are inclusive, equitable, and promote gender equality.

Despite these efforts, the proposed methods and approaches to obtain data to measure progress towards achieving SDG4 (in particular Indicator 4.1.1) only include regionally and globally comparable measures of learning from school-based assessments. In contexts where a significant proportion of children are out of school or attending irregularly, school-based assessments suffer from selection bias. Collecting data from households ensures that all children, regardless of the type of school they attend, are represented in the study sample.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS
Learning assessment data for developing countries needs to be relevant and appropriate not just for monitoring, but for providing information that is actionable for improving children’s learning. In order to identify and implement actions to improve children’s learning, we need to assess where children are today and build from there, rather than assess where we think they ought to be. The reality is that many children are not regularly in school and many children are several grade levels behind. If a child is unable to read, then a pen and paper test will not work, and will not give a holistic picture of learning progress for all children.

Evidence should be relatively straightforward to generate and to comprehend. Only then can it lend itself to action. Data needs to be easily understood by those who must act – whether policy makers, teachers, or parents. We need to start simple. As children make progress and a practice of using large-scale evidence to inform policy and practice emerges, then tools and interventions can evolve over time with the changing contexts of the developing world. Right now, school-based, pen-and-paper assessments are only relevant and useful to developed countries where they originated. Household-based, citizen-led assessments present a strong and necessary alternative to understanding progress towards achieving SDG4.