I am happy to write a foreword for this report, which is as timely as it is important.

Measuring skills globally remains insufficient with frustratingly little knowledge of learning in many countries and regions within countries. The evidence we do have shows that children around the world are not learning enough to improve their own and their nations' and communities' lives. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), which I lead, has estimated that 674 million children and adolescents are not achieving minimum proficiency levels (MPLs) in reading and mathematics. Moreover, scholars in our network have estimated that, relatively speaking, children in low- and lower-middle income countries are considerably more behind their OECD peers in learning than in access and entry to school, or even progression. However, it is hard to address this situation without less top-down and more granular measurements of learning.

Foundational learning is extremely important, since - by definition - it lays the foundation for everything else. It also is a fertile area for improvement, because the techniques for improving foundational skills are better known than the techniques for improving learning in, say, secondary schools in more qualitative subjects such as history or social studies, hugely important as those are.

The issue of foundational learning is particularly resonant today amidst the COVID-19 crisis, as foundational skills are known to be the easiest to lose when schooling is interrupted, as is evident from studies of learning loss during vacations. They are also the hardest to regain once schooling re-starts. Therefore, measurement of such skills is key to develop adequate responses to future emergencies, such as pandemics, refugees and migrants crises, etc.

Against this background, the measurement that ICAN offers and PAL Network has done previously, is useful for various reasons. Firstly, it can raise awareness among policy-makers, especially if the measurement is quite concrete and relatively easy to understand. Secondly, if analysed together with other data sources, it can help understand reasons for insufficient learning and design ways to deal with it. Thirdly, if the measurement has a head-teacher equivalent (or such a thing can be developed) for formative needs, or is easy to implement, it can be used to target interventions to particular districts, schools or even classrooms. In any of these contexts it can link to curricular standards and help set practical, achievable benchmarks. Finally, it can be used, in the happiest of cases, to track progress and take justified pride in achievement and defend the budget of the education sector in discussions with Ministries of Finance.

The ICAN assessment tool is open-source, robust and simple to use. It is available in 11 languages. It was developed through a collaborative effort between PAL Network member organisations in 13 low- and middle-income countries across Africa, America and Asia. Considering that COVID-19 has pushed millions of children further away from schooling, I believe that this is an opportune time to re-invest in foundational learning. PAL Network's ICAN is a start.

Since the UIS is the repository, standards-setter, and coordinator for SDG 4.1.1 (a) as well as for other education levels, I particularly appreciate how the ICAN tool can be used for policy-linking with other assessments, such as PASEC, as discussed in the UIS Webinar on SDG 4.1.1 Measurement Tools - Applications in the Wake of COVID-19 in June 2020. The UIS is working with partners on tech-enabled pilot programs to increase the assessment of foundational learning throughout our communities. And I am very pleased to acknowledge that ICAN has strived, from the get-go, to align as much as possible, thus offering international comparability of results aligned to SDG 4.1.1 (a).

To sum up, I am truly excited to see this effort, and to warmly endorse its results.

July, 2020

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