The Pathway to Progress on SDG 4: A Symposium

A Collection of Essays

Center for Global Development

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Introduction

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Earlier this year, Girin Beeharry stepped down as the inaugural director of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's global education program. He's not going quietly though. "The Pathway to Progress on SDG 4," first published in the *International Journal of Educational Development*, is—in essence—Girin's manifesto for international actors in the education sector. The essay has little patience for what Girin perceives as our collective failure to address alarmingly poor learning outcomes, and it lays out a clear (and sometimes controversial) vision for what needs to change to get back on track toward SDG 4. The heart of this manifesto is that we must reorient global aid for education around promoting foundational literacy and numeracy, unflinchingly monitor progress on that core goal, and hold all development institutions accountable for measurable results in this domain.

The essay has made waves, not least because Girin has worked closely with his target audience for years, and he draws on detailed knowledge of how various international organizations function and malfunction. His essay embodies what we know about Girin. It is thoughtful but refreshingly direct. It is evidence-driven but marries deep analysis with a feverish focus on impact. Girin's passion for change is palpable and his relentless challenge to the sector to do better for the children we purport to serve shines through.

In March, CGD and Rise hosted a private roundtable to hear reactions from the education sector leaders to whom Girin's essay is directed. Now, we are delighted to present a symposium of reactions and commentaries on "The Pathway to Progress on SDG 4." In this collection, sector leaders, researchers, and practitioners provide their reflections and counter proposals to Girin's essay. Taken collectively, the range of contributors and the insights their essays provide reflect the impact that Girin's perspective has had on so many of us and remind us quite how much he has contributed to the education sector.

We offer thanks to Girin for stimulating this timely debate, and we are grateful to all our contributors for their thoughtful responses.

The Pathway to Progress on SDG 4 Requires the Global Education Architecture to Focus on Foundational Learning and to Hold Ourselves Accountable For Achieving It

Girin Beeharry, Global Education Program, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

This essay was first published in the International Journal of Education Development in April 2021.

> *But surpassing all stupendous inventions, what sublimity of mind was his who dreamed of finding means to communicate his deepest thoughts to any other person, though distant by mighty intervals of place and time! Of talking with those who are in India; of speaking to those who are not yet born and will not be born for a thousand or ten thousand years; and with what facility, by the different arrangements of twenty characters upon a page! [] Let this be the seal of all the admirable inventions of mankind [...].*
> — Galileo Galilei (1632, pp. 120–121)

1. Introduction

Today, nine in ten children in Low Income Countries (LICs) cannot read with comprehension by their tenth birthday (World Bank, 2019a).[1] In other words, they are functionally illiterate, this after decades of declarations and initiatives by the global education community to improve the quality of basic education. This being the degree zero of our collective aspirations, there is understandably a sense of malaise about the effectiveness of the global education architecture in helping countries address what has been termed the "learning crisis." In the last many years, the education community has sought to respond to the perceived

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1. Learning poverty indicator developed by the World Bank in coordination with the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

deficiencies in the architecture in the form of well-intentioned partnerships, specialized financing facilities, commissions, committees, platforms, initiatives, and forums.[2] But these attempts to "fix" the architecture have yet to demonstrate meaningful success: learning levels are persistently low (Le Nestour and Sandefur, forthcoming), and positive deviants hard to find.[3]

As a committed partner to the global education agenda, I believe the opportunity is ripe to re-energize the education community by showing meaningful results in the next few years. To do that we should focus on a few objectives, work in countries that share those objectives, go at them with all that the global community has to offer, monitor progress regularly, and hold ourselves collectively accountable for progress. My submission is that one priority objective ought to be addressing Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) in LICs, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

I propose FLN as a priority because it is critical for any meaningful progress on the wider Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 agenda. It is also concrete and measurable enough to be both actionable and provide a much-needed metric against which to hold ourselves collectively accountable. This is necessary because the primary actors in global education are currently significantly less than the sum of their parts, prone to general calls to action, but lacking strong incentives for focus and results -- a tendency exacerbated by inadequate demand from developing countries themselves for specific outcomes. This paper provides an analysis of the insufficient leadership exercised by the global education architecture, and lays out a set of proposals for these institutions and the sector as a whole to make sure the next decade is one where FLN takes its rightful place in the global education agenda.

2. A short and incomplete history of tall and unfulfilled aspirations

1990s: The Jomtien Declaration of Education for All emphasizes the need to improve literacy because *"literacy is a necessary skill in itself and the foundation of other life skills"* (UNESCO, 1990, p. 6). It sets out the need for precise floor metrics: *"such that an agreed percentage of an appropriate age cohort [...] attains or surpasses a defined level of necessary learning achievement"* (p. 5).

2000s: The Dakar Framework for Action includes a commitment to improving quality in education and ensuring the achievement of learning outcomes by all in literacy and numeracy (UNESCO, 2000). The seminal 2002 Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR) report already acknowledges the difficulty in monitoring learning (UNESCO, 2002). GPE's precursor, the Education For All Fast Track Initiative (EFA FTI) is established in 2002. The 2010 evaluation of EFA FTI concludes: *"the FTI has remained a weak partnership, with weak accountability, and has not delivered the "compact" to which it refers"* (Cambridge Education, Mokoro and Oxford Policy Management, 2010, p. 11). Following the evaluation, the organization evolved into GPE.

2010s: The World Bank's 2011 Education Strategy posits: *"The overarching goal is not just schooling, but learning"* (2011, p. 1). It notes the alarmingly low levels of learning, starting early. The Bank's proposed response is to focus on increasing accountability and results, and to support education reforms that promote learning outcomes. The Brookings Global Compact on Learning report (Perlman Robinson, 2011) again notes that students are in school but not learning; that there are no agreed-upon metrics for tracking learning; and makes the case for a focus on basic literacy and numeracy in school.

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2. Inter alia, the Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait, Education Outcomes Fund, the International Financing Facility for Education, the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, the Education Commission, the Education Workforce Initiative, the Multilateral Education Platform, the Global Education Forum.
3. The PASEC 2019 data shows improvement in early grade literacy and numeracy in a few countries, but the levels remain low (PASEC, 2020).

Other key milestones from the last decade include the Education Commission's report, which laments that *"despite the known and increasing benefits of education, the world today is facing a global learning crisis"* (2016, p. 29). This was followed by the World Bank's World Development Report (2018) which reprised the theme of a learning crisis.

To review past exhortations on the need to improve learning is to invite reflection on our collective failure to be anywhere near ending illiteracy. The failure does not primarily reside in the quality of the ideas: many of the current prescriptions are not terribly dissimilar from past ones: focus on foundational literacy, improve the quality of assessments, address proximal and distal system issues, hold each other accountable, etc. Why do we then chronically underdeliver on those ambitions? Of course, there is a limit to what the education aid architecture can do; education is local: aid accounts for only 2% of education spending in Lower Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) and 18% in LICs (World Bank and UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, 2021). However, the aid architecture surely bears its share of responsibility: in addition to funding, it provides guidance to countries and influences domestic budgets, so the nature of its support should come under critical examination. Is it providing the right guidance, does it have appropriate feedback loops on its performance, and does it hold itself accountable?

3. The global education architecture and its discontents

Burnett (2019) identifies six deficient aspects of the architecture: (a) global leadership, including prioritization; (b) norms and standard setting; (c) knowledge generation and dissemination; (d) monitoring of performance; (e) provision of accountability; and (f) inadequate finance.

A quick mapping of the responses offered by the global education community to these problems suggests that their primary preoccupation has been (f) inadequate

finance. Before exploring these responses, it is worth examining whether this aspect of the architecture deserves the spotlight. While the current levels of education spending fall short of what is needed to achieve SDG 4, particularly for LICs, it is less clear that large increases in either donor aid or domestic financing are feasible. First, as noted above, the magnitude of donor aid is currently minimal relative to domestic spending in all but LICs, and the scope for increasing this funding in the context of the pandemic is limited. The value-add of donors in LICs and, even more so, in LMICs, is rather to offer support to countries to improve their education systems by sharing technical expertise. Countries, which provide the bulk of education funding, also have limited fiscal space to increase education spend, except as their tax-to-GDP ratio improves, and their economies grow.

What are some of the education architecture's responses to the problem of inadequate funding? These fall broadly into two groups: advocacy, and new instruments, both of which have had limited effect. On the advocacy side, the Education Commission's Learning Generation report estimated that an increase in education finance from $1.2 to $3 trillion a year by 2030 is needed, with Official Development Assistance (ODA) increasing from $13 billion in 2015 to $49 billion a year by 2030 (Education Commission, 2016). In fact, ODA has remained well below this level. As for the instruments, several of these appear to be based on the premise that donors, dissatisfied with the effectiveness of current bilateral and multilateral instruments, will find financing instruments specializing on particular groups of countries, e.g., facing emergencies (Education Cannot Wait), or those graduating from concessional lending (International Finance Facility for Education); or promises of a tighter link between funding and results (Education Outcomes Fund) to be more attractive, and thus increase education ODA. Although that might yet change, there has hardly been a rush to support these new instruments, and they remain marginal to Development Assistance to Education (DAE), just as DAE is marginal (except in LICs) to domestic financing. These new instruments provide

increased competition for scarce funds from the same few education donors – in 2019, the US, UK and Norway provided nearly half of ODA to basic education.[4] The case for more aid funding can certainly be argued, but there is no state of the world in which goals for donor spending commonly advocated can plausibly be met. Aid for education will always face the unwelcome question of prioritization.

There has been little global conversation about (b) norms and standards, and more about (c) the deficiency of knowledge generation and dissemination, often phrased as a dearth in "global public goods." The education sector is contrasted unfavorably with the health sector in that regard – in education research receives much less ODA than in health (CGD, 2019). As a foundation, our initial foray into the global education arena was to focus on this piece of the puzzle: what is the evidence, what works, what can we learn from positive deviants? We continue to invest in knowledge generation and dissemination. But the conclusion we came to is that there is little demand for these public goods. There is an insufficient but growing literature out there on the cost-effectiveness of rigorously-evaluated interventions, there are compendiums of promising innovations in education, there is a growing body of research on the complex system dynamics at play in the sector, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has launched a Knowledge and Innovation Exchange, and the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and the World Bank jointly launched a Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel, all of which seek to fill the gap in know-how. But there remains a yawning gap between the knowledge that has been produced and what donors and countries choose to do. My throw-away conjecture, that I will not seek to defend here, is that (a) the questions answered by the research community are rarely the questions asked by policymakers; and (b) there is no true demand for knowledge because there is no sense of urgency about solving problems.

The balance of the global education community's responses seems to address Burnett's (a): the global leadership vacuum. In Burnett's working definition (2019), the exercise of leadership is primarily about the ability to prioritize. I propose a friendly amendment: leadership is actually the exercise of three of his six functions: (a) prioritization (of certain goals), (d) monitoring of performance (towards these goals), and (e) provision of accountability (to achieving the goals). The exam question then is: does the education aid architecture provide such leadership?

3.1. Prioritization

Launched in 2000, the education Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 had a very sharp focus. While problematic, it spurred global action to expand primary school completion and, by that metric, could be argued as successful. Fifteen years later, SDG 4 is conversely all-encompassing: it is hard to find an education-related objective that is not included in one of its 10 targets and 43 indicators (UIS, 2020a), which span the entire spectrum from universal access to preschool education to "education for sustainable development and global citizenship."

Until very recently, attempts to prioritize have primarily come from bilateral aid agencies. USAID's 2011 education strategy (USAID, 2011), had a sharp focus on early grade reading – the more recent strategy for basic education is more expansive in its ambitions for young children, with early childhood education, numeracy, and social-emotional skills featuring alongside literacy (USAID, 2018). And the UK's FCDO (previously DFID) has declared various areas of focus over the years, more recently girls' education, disability, and learning (UK Government, 2018, UK Government, 2019). Despite trying hard to nudge multilateral organizations to adopt their priorities, bilaterals' declarations of focus primarily affect their own programs.

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4. Data from (OECD CRS, 2019) database, with scholarships and imputed student costs removed.

Prioritization seems entirely impossible for member-state organizations like UNESCO that seek to serve the needs of all members: the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee it convenes reflects this in its composition and in the fact that it devotes attention to all 10 SDG 4 targets for all countries, which can only mean a shallow overview at best. When prompted to focus, UNESCO's reaction has been to oppose, or offer terribly unconvincing responses.[5]

Nor is focus easy for constituency-based partnerships like the GPE. GPE has some focus: of the aid agencies, their funding is more oriented to primary education, to LICs, and, as of December 2020, to learning outcomes (GPE, 2020a). But their planning and consultation process is for the education "sector" as a whole. And their partnership structure means that they need to cater to the divergent interests of all their stakeholders. While there continue to be voices in the Board seeking focus, that is not where the Board lands. In recent months there have been Board level discussions at GPE on whether to adopt a compelling "rallying cry" (GPE, 2020b), i.e., a sharper articulation of its overarching objective. It is unclear whether this was meant to be a useful slogan going into their 2021 replenishment, or a genuine attempt at sharpening the goal the Partnership would hold itself accountable for. In any case, the Board was unable to agree on a focus and abandoned the endeavor.

Prioritization is also challenged by some as anti-democratic attempts to relitigate the SDGs (Archer, 2019). Another common angle is that since education is a right, rather than prioritize particular goals, the task ahead is to make sure the programs needed to attain all SDG 4 targets are adequately funded. The key weakness in this line of reasoning is the enormous discrepancy between the scale of the financing needs which have been calculated – e.g., the Education Commission's estimate that spending would need to rise from $1.2 trillion to $3 trillion a year in 2030 (Education Commission, 2016) – and the resources that Ministries of Finance and donors can realistically draw upon.

Conversely, I would argue that the right to learning, which starts with acquiring foundational skills, is a powerful argument for prioritization.

Others agree to the need for some prioritization but have very different ideas of what those priorities ought to be. A non-exhaustive list of current topics includes: early childhood development (ECD), girls' education, universal free secondary schooling, socio-emotional and other "21st Century" skills, and short-term skilling for workplace readiness. Who is to argue that these are not entirely desirable goals? All of them find their rightful place among the SDG 4 targets, but countries will need to consider which ones to prioritize depending on the maturity of their education systems.

Perhaps most importantly, it is even less feasible for the global education actors to focus when the countries they seek to support do not express any strong interest in such focus. I will return to this shortly. Because of this, *attempts by global actors to prioritize an agenda frequently leads to the following outcome: countries go along with what they know to be the "donor agenda" because funding and technical assistance flow from it, but domestic energies are directed somewhere else entirely.*

Why does it matter that the sector lacks clear priorities? The reality is that prioritization is happening all the time by virtue of the fact that there is simply not enough money to go around to meet all the objectives. Which means every agenda is underpowered and progress is grindingly slow. Getting any of the SDG 4 objectives accomplished will be extraordinarily difficult and cannot be achieved by devoting inadequate attention, ingenuity, and resources to it. It is perhaps a little too hopeful to believe that there will be massive funding redirected to education from national or aid budgets when countries are being hammered by a pandemic. Note that LICs and LMICs already allocate more of their government budget to education than richer countries. If anything, we are likely facing a world where maintaining current levels of aid and domestic funding would be deemed a success.

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5. UNESCO offers to double its education funding for SSA in a bid to reduce the "funding deficit" of $39 billion (UNESCO, 2019).

The real choice we are making is between a tacit form of prioritization and an explicit one. There is no question that countries and aid agencies will always end up doing something that is a balance between things that are important to do, things that are possible to do, and things that are urgent to do, but if there were an explicit prioritization framework, the hidden costs of poor decisions would be made obvious.

We do not have a nice framework that factors in equity and returns considerations, so I instead lay bare the observations and beliefs that make me advocate for the aid architecture to do all it can to help improve foundational literacy and numeracy in SSA/LICs as *one* of its top objectives:

- Practically all SDG 4 goals depend on the achievement of FLN. Without FLN Mali, say, cannot possibly ensure that by 2030, all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. *FLN is a gateway skill*: there is no leapfrogging one's way to twelve years of schooling for all girls without it.
- The current levels of learning are catastrophic; e.g., *two* percent of Malian children meet minimum proficiency levels for early grade reading (UIS, 2020b).
- Most poor students today can "access" some form of schooling, but they drop out disproportionately because schools fail them; by focusing on universalizing FLN, we are sure to primarily address the poor and marginalized.
- Universalizing quality FLN means we are addressing the learning of children in *and* out of school.
- While it would be satisfying to point to convincing causal evidence on the impact of FLN skills on later outcomes, this is still an area that lacks rigor, and deserves increased research attention (Evans and Hares, forthcoming). However, even without proof that FLN will have the largest impact on long-term outcomes, building the foundation is the only route to more advanced skills.

The case for focusing on FLN in LICs/SSA is that they are behind on all attainment, achievement – nearly 9 of 10 children aged 10 in SSA are not able to read with comprehension (World Bank, 2019a) – and equity metrics. They have had to very quickly hire masses of teachers to meet the MDG 2 targets at the cost of quality – the proportion of trained teachers at the primary level in SSA fell from 84 % in 2000 to 64 % in 2017 (UIS, 2020c); and, uniquely, SSA faces massive student population growth for the next many decades. Countries like Madagascar, where the population of 28 million, is projected to rise to 100 million by 2100 (United Nations, 2019a), and the cohort of new students entering primary school every year is meant to increase through to 2093 (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2019b).

I hasten to add that improving FLN, or its World Bank formulation of improving reading comprehension by age 10 (World Bank, 2019b), is not a new goal plucked out of thin air. Indeed, they are mere variations or expressions in lay terms of the very first two SDG 4 indicators: SDG 4.1.1(a) and (b) for the initiated. Equally importantly, this is not to indicate that education stops at the acquisition of literacy, or that we should reify particular literacy or numeracy metrics: there is a substantive conversation to be had in each country on its quality aspirations for basic education.[6] But the reality of it is – once again – that there is no bypassing the step of getting FLN right.

There are few case studies of substantial system-wide improvement in learning outcomes in LICs and LMICs, so the few cases of improvement are of great interest. Take the case of the municipality of Sobral, in the state of Ceará in Brazil. While Ceará has the fifth lowest GDP per capita in the country, the municipality of Sobral has the highest ranking in the National Education Index (Rodrigues & Loureiro, 2020). The results were obtained entirely endogenously to the system. The biggest takeaway from Sobral, apart from the predictable ingredient of political will, is their relentless focus on the *achievement of literacy by the end of second grade*

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6. UIS is coordinating the exercise to set regional benchmarks for SDG 4: http://tcg.uis.unesco.org/benchmarks/.

(Crouch, 2020a). Education in Sobral does not stop at the second grade; like every school system they have much larger aspirations for the education of their students, but they understood that they could not achieve any of those if they did not achieve early grade literacy. And because of that focus, they were able to examine not the "sectoral" dysfunctions at large, but the system dysfunctions *as they relate to this objective*, which provides a sharper diagnosis, for instance, on the instructional practices and the suite of system levers (textbooks, teacher training, coaching, assessments) that sustain good practice (Crouch, 2020b; Loureiro et al., 2020).

The contrast with the health sector is striking. A focus on reducing neonatal, infant, and under-5 mortality in LICs does not especially provoke heartburn. These are useful markers: while it is perfectly understood that health does not stop mattering at age 5, it is also obvious that there is no thriving without surviving. These metrics elicit pointed responses, much more so than broad "health sector plans" can. Finally, these indicators are often markers of the health of the health system more broadly.

Far from being a relitigation of SDG 4, securing FLN is a precondition for its attainment. To take the SDG 4 goals very seriously we must recognize that they cannot be achieved without solid basic education; and to take the invitation to "reach the furthest behind first" (UN, 2015, p. 7) literally we must advocate for a concentration of donor energies on SSA and LICs.

However, if there is such a strong case for prioritizing FLN in LICs, a reasonable question is then: why is it not at the top of the domestic education agenda in those countries?

First, policymakers in LICs rarely prioritize FLN because there is no electoral demand for quality primary education – see for example Harding & Stasavage (2013). The few governments that have decided to afford it priority have done so because of the personal conviction of policymakers – as outlined by Crouch in his review of the case studies of Sobral in Brazil, Puebla in Mexico and Kenya, political motivation was crucial to the focus on FLN (2020b). That the Government of India recently launched an FLN mission (Dhawan, 2020) is the product of the conviction of a few bureaucrats, not something that is in response to electoral demand. Governments face parental and popular pressure on more tangible things and thus more readily respond to issues like free secondary schools, and workplace readiness. FLN is fundamental to good secondary schooling and to skilling, but that perspective is hard to maintain.

Second, what makes it difficult for policymakers to prioritize FLN is that many think it is somehow solved. A recent survey by the Center for Global Development (CGD) of some 900 LIC and LMIC education bureaucrats shows that policymakers' perception of levels of learning vary highly in accuracy, and that in most countries the estimations are optimistic relative to the actual levels of learning (Crawfurd et al., forthcoming). In other words, policymakers are not aware they have a problem to solve.

Third, there is the common view, based on long historical precedence, that the primary purpose of an education system is to produce a highly-trained elite who will be captains of industry, run government, and power economic growth. Thus, a system where only a select few make it through the end of secondary school, and even fewer are admitted to university, is perceived to be exactly what the country needs. In this model, the pursuit of broad human capital development, and even something as basic as literacy, is not considered to be a priority (Muralidharan, 2019). This view of the world is underpinned by the belief that the system is meritocratic, and that the best and brightest, irrespective of their family circumstances, will rise to the top, to the benefit of all. This is of course not true – young people in Sub-Saharan Africa whose head of household did not complete primary education are *ten* times less likely to get to tertiary education than those whose parents attained at least a secondary education (Darvas et al., 2017).

3.2. Performance monitoring

The second component of global leadership is monitoring performance. How is the education aid architecture monitoring performance today? The reference points for global[7] monitoring are UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)'s publications (e.g., the SDG 4 Databook) and the GEMR.

The 2019 edition of the UIS SDG 4 Databook (UIS, 2019) was interesting mostly because it was highly problematic: not only were there very few data points for SDG 4.1.1 a and b in SSA (which together ought to give a good sense of learning in early grades), but in some cases the data from the same country did not make sense from year to year. While a new reporting protocol has removed some of the inconsistencies from the data on the UIS website (UIS, 2020b), for many countries in SSA there are no data points at all in the last 10 years for early grade reading, while for others the only available data is shockingly old – for example, the latest data point for Botswana is for 2011.

UIS is hampered by the fact that LICs/LMICs may not conduct quality assessments with any established periodicity, often because donors support them inconsistently; report on data sometimes coming from entirely different assessments, so that year-to-year comparison is meaningless; and rarely participate in cross-national assessments, particularly for early grades. But, perhaps more importantly, who is the client for UIS data? If this data were feeding into an accountability structure, an alarm would be raised about the fact that, at a global level, we cannot answer very basic questions: which countries are making progress on FLN, which are not, which are on track to meeting their SDG targets and which are not, which countries stand out that we ought to learn from, where should resources be targeted based on need? If these questions are not being begged, it is because there is no clear, high-powered recipient that can act on the data UIS produces.

The Global Education *Monitoring Report* is meant to, well, monitor. But because they are meant to report on all 43 indicators for every region, and because they are in good measure reliant on UIS data, it is hard to make sense of what these reports tell us, besides that we are behind on everything, repeatedly. And monitoring on its own may not be particularly helpful if not also accompanied by an examination of why progress is slow or quick. The primary problem, however, is that, like the UIS, the GEMR does not feed into a process by which the data is taken to heart and corrective action is taken as a result; in other words, it is not tied to an accountability mechanism.

3.3. Accountability

The third leg of the global leadership stool is accountability. The term itself is a source of great angst in the education sector, often because accountability is equated – wrongly – with blaming teachers. I am unapologetic about the use of the term in the following sense: if we, the global education community, are collectively committing to something, and are to take that commitment seriously, it is incumbent on us to take periodic stock of progress, to reflect on the reasons why we are or aren't making any, and to alter the course of our action as required. *Moving education outcomes is incredibly hard; it is even harder when we are not learning and adapting our work.* The lack of accountability today does not translate into immediate consequences for anyone – not technical agencies, not funders, not philanthropies, not governments, not NGOs, not CSOs – except for students. They are the ones whose chances in life are denied because we are not willing to take a critical look at what we are doing and striving to do better.

It is not true to say there is no accountability at all. Indeed, each individual aid agency tracks their projects and reports internally, and countries have their own feedback loops, particularly pass rates for high-stakes exams. Not to single them out, but if the World Bank already correctly identified the problem of learning in

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7. There are loose forms of monitoring at local level (e.g., Joint Sector Reviews, mid-term reviews of bilateral and multilateral reviews), but those are inconsistent and certainly rarely focus on such metrics as early grade literacy and numeracy as an outcome of interest.

its 'Learning for All – Education Strategy 2020' as far back as 2011, how does it rate itself against the organizational performance, outcomes, and impact metrics it signed up for back then, and what has happened as a result of not achieving them? Tellingly, the Learning at Scale Project funded by us-- an attempt by researchers to unearth and examine exemplar projects that improved learning meaningfully at scale -- failed to find a single World Bank or GPE project that met the researchers' inclusion criteria (Piper & Dubeck, 2021). It is hard to convince oneself that the aid agencies hold themselves to account particularly rigorously.

Do we as *a collective* hold ourselves accountable? Even less so. First, there are few collective fora to discuss progress. In theory the UN SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee could play that role, but in its current form it is not set up for anything like reviewing progress except in the broadest possible sense, and it certainly does not energize collective action for specific objectives. The Committee is in the process of reimagining itself; this presents an opportunity for it to think through fit-for-purpose structures to strengthen performance monitoring and mutual accountability.

The GPE is on paper an ideal platform for such collective reflection and collective response. After all, it focuses on LICs and on basic education, and it has all the partners at the same table: if there is lack of progress there is no one else to point to but the organizations represented at the GPE Board. But GPE's Results Framework, for instance, disappointingly only tracks the *"proportion of developing country partners (DCPs) showing improvement on learning outcomes (basic education),"* (GPE, 2019, p. 1) and reports on only about a third of countries in their portfolio. More curiously, the GPE Board does not seem keen to take stock of progress on a regular basis, say, to look at the progress in getting even basic data about learning levels, or look at the bottom 20 countries and ascertain whether they are making sufficient progress on proximate indicators of learning. One concern is that this would put countries on the spot, which is not the spirit of the partnership. Yet this is an unconvincing argument: this could be an opportunity to review the work that the various agencies do in support of countries and hold them accountable. An uncharitable view would be that no one wants to be held accountable: countries may stand to lose funding if they don't tell a good story; donors need to report back to their domestic constituencies and also show their tax dollars are being put to good use; so a low-expectations low-performance equilibrium obtains. GPE is in the thick of a governance review, and of developing a new strategic plan and results framework: these present a timely opportunity to strengthen its accountability structure.

The current global architecture is exquisitely positioned today to know next to nothing, let alone have a meaningful conversation about whether we are making sufficient progress on even such a foundational objective of SDG 4 as that of ensuring basic literacy.

4. Getting a few things done well

Here then is the state of things: (a) there is a dependency among SDG 4's objectives: if the foundation is weak – as is the case in LICs -- it is to fool ourselves to pretend that we can meet objectives such as 12 years of schooling for every girl by 2030; (b) improving the quality of basic education is very hard, and cannot be accomplished by facile prescriptions: it requires rigor, serious system-wide effort, and persistence; (c) there is not enough money from domestic and international sources to support all SDG 4 objectives more than symbolically; (d) the outlook for aid and domestic budgets is bleak and to live in the hopes of a financial manna in the middle of a brutal pandemic is to be excessively hopeful; (e) if we are to make meaningful progress, the aid community needs to prioritize among the many competing objectives – I make the case for FLN in LICs as a priority – and hold itself collectively accountable for progress; (f) neither countries nor constituency- or member-based partnerships are willing or capable of prioritizing or holding themselves accountable. We are stuck. In the past many months, there have been a number of attempts to "do something": the creation of the Global Education Forum, the Education

Commission, the Multilateral Education Platform, a new GPE strategy, and now revamping of the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee. *My submission is that unless these efforts aim squarely at the problems of prioritization, performance monitoring, and accountability, their impact will be minimal at best.*

Past confabs have skirted these difficult issues, and collaboration efforts end up being loose commitments to partner better, and to advocate for more money for education (which is admittedly needed for LICs). Because the incentives faced by actors in the global architecture are so powerful, because there is no real sense of crisis about the 'learning crisis', and because sectoral leadership is so distributed, I don't see room for big shifts in the architecture, or grand bargains that address the problems of prioritization, of monitoring progress, and of holding oneself accountable. The experience in the health sector indicates that even high-powered initiatives (IHP+, UHC2030), which seek to strengthen collaboration and accountability among agencies in pursuit of joint objectives, meet with limited success: the incentives within aid agencies to pursue their own agenda and show results trump those inviting collaboration between agencies; and agreements at head-of-agency level is never sufficient to get their highly-decentralized operations to follow suit, unless internal incentives are made strong enough.

I would passionately like my pessimism to be proven wrong. In the meantime, my proposed solution is to cut the Gordian knot by building on what we have, inviting tactical shifts by a few actors, leaving the architecture as it is, and side-stepping the vexing prioritization issue by simply working with countries and agencies already persuaded of the need to prioritize FLN. The opportunity is seeing greater convergence of late of a few major actors around FLN as a priority objective: the World Bank's Foundational Learning Compact (FLC), seeks to support "accelerator" countries in their bid to improve FLN; USAID has been the agency most sharply focused on "all children reading" in the last decade and continues to be a prominent investor in this area;

UNICEF launched a "mission-approach" to FLN. There is also the cumulated knowledge of many local and international NGOs which have worked on this particular problem for a decade or more. While the FLC is a promising nugget to build from, it will require the same ingredients of maintained focus, performance monitoring and accountability structures to motivate real progress. Here is my wish-list for the pieces that these and other partners could contribute to make sure we stay on task.

My invitation to policymakers in LICs is:

- To those who have chosen to focus on FLN as a priority and decided to work with global education agencies on improving it, to make sure there is an honest annual review of progress.
- To those that have not, to perhaps take another look at the data for your country, not the exam scores, and if you don't have a learning assessment, make sure you introduce one and ask for support from the development partners. Decide whether you are satisfied with the levels of learning obtaining at the end of grade 3, knowing that those students who have not achieved mastery of those skills by then likely never will; and knowing that secondary schooling will thus remain the privilege of the fortunate.

My invitation to GPE is:

- To leverage its current governance review to make good on its desire for greater accountability. Or, cutting to the chase, how about reviewing at every Board meeting priority outcome indicators, particularly FLN, for a set of countries?
- To ensure that each Joint Sector Review reports back on the proximate indicators for priority SDG 4 objectives, including FLN.
- Ensure that countries receiving funding from GPE establish robust assessment systems, as per its own requirements.

My invitation to UNESCO is:

- To avail themselves of the current effort to restructure the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee so it can fill in the leadership gap. A sub-committee could, for instance, focus on LICs and a set of priority indicators as identified by UIS and the GEMR, which includes FLN (Montoya & Antoninis, 2019); use the data collated by UIS and the GEMR to shed light on progress regularly; and be high-powered enough in its composition so that the review from the committee triggers action by countries and the global actors supporting them.
- To fund and fundraise for UIS properly. We cannot monitor SDG 4.1.1 without data. Until countries produce robust data from their assessment systems, we need creative ways to make collective sense of learning outcomes.
- To rally its regional networks behind the Global Education Monitoring Report's ability to monitor progress on FLN in SSA and LICs on a regular basis.
- To support the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) to develop specific capacity in country to interrogate their education systems with a view to improving FLN.

My invitation to the World Bank is:

- To treat their institution-wide commitment to reducing learning poverty by half by 2030 with utmost seriousness. It will require a serious effort to align Bank operations against those objectives. This is not a given: the Bank has objectives at a regional level that compete with their corporate objectives, and its operations are highly decentralized.[8] It will also be incumbent on the World Bank to equip staff with the right know-how.
- To partner actively with others, especially those organizations that have been sharply focused on

FLN in the last decade; we need to make use of the assets we already have.
- Equally importantly, if this is to have the level of effort and persistence over the decade that it will require, to conduct honest, regular reviews of progress with governments at the highest level and with partners, and to report on progress.

My invitation to bilateral donors is:

- To fund FLN adequately, particularly in SSA. Bilateral aid in education is larger[9] than multilateral aid, and bilateral agencies have more latitude to prioritize. A recommitment from USAID to their "all children learning" agenda would be incredibly welcome, as would seeing FCDO deepen their country work in support of learning.
- To support research and evaluation. Again, bilaterals are uniquely able to direct funding to public goods, which have far greater reach than their programming (e.g., the evaluation of Tusome).
- To use their voice in multilateral forums not only to foster "greater collaboration" but to promote the review of progress and collective accountability against agreed metrics.

My invitation to CSOs and NGOs is:

- To use their powerful voices to not only advocate for more spending on education, but to hold countries and the global aid architecture accountable for the collective promises made over the years to improve learning outcomes, starting with FLN.

My invitation to other actors in the global architecture is:

- To join this collective venture to address FLN, or SDG 4.1.1(a) and (b). This is a very hard task: there

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8. Even a cursory examination of the World Bank's current docket shows an enormous discrepancy between the know-how cumulated and codified by the World Bank and what its projects, e.g., the India STARS project, supports, (World Bank, 2020).
9. In 2019 bilateral contributions constituted 65% of education ODA, compared to 35% for multilateral contributions. Data from (OECD CRS, 2019) database with scholarships and imputed student costs removed.

are precious few case studies of LICs having done so at any scale. It will require focus, persistence, know-how, rigor, ingenuity, political savvy, and account-ability. The incentives of the global aid architecture to maintain that focus and persistence are weak, and organizations can contribute in myriad ways to keep us collectively on our toes.

· To offer a better pathway for progress, one that retains contact with fiscal realities, if you do not like this one.

Our Global Education Program at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation emphasizes foundational learning in primary grades. We support efforts to improve the availability and quality of learning assessment data, to identify barriers to educational access and learn-ing, and to conduct research on effective instructional practices, including using educational technology. We also support efforts to measure progress, celebrate successes, and challenge education decision-makers when commitments are not realized. Within the means of our program, we look forward to supporting these shifts and our partners as we collectively work towards meaningful results in the next few years.

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Postscript

Girin Beeharry, Global Education Program, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

I have now been blessed with a lot of feedback on the invited essay I published in the *International Journal of Educational Development* calling on global education actors to focus on foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) in low-income countries (LICs), and hold ourselves accountable for progress. The feedback provided by colleagues who have spent a lifetime in this sector is steeped in wisdom and mercifully avoids performative and corporate responses. I am glad there is disagreement: we arrive at better answers by having a genuine debate. I try to clarify my views under four themes below: I hope to dispel what I think are misunderstandings but leave many arguments unanswered because I do not have ready responses for them. I conclude with a renewed appeal to make tangible progress this decade.

SDG 4: Dream, smorgasbord, objective, or plan?

I think I may be more of an SDG 4 literalist than others. SDG 4 is neither a dream nor a plan, nor a buffet of options, but a set of objectives with defined outcomes and a specific timeframe.

The risk of treating SDG 4 as a dream is that it enables us to feel good about the work we do without the need to change anything. After all, every time we buy a textbook, build a school, train a teacher, we are virtuously doing God's work, so why bend the arc of progress?

Treating SDG 4 as a smorgasbord is equally misguided. It suggests that all the SDG 4 objectives are equally important and equally achievable for education systems at any level of maturity; that there are no choices to be made, and that countries should sample liberally from this very large menu of options; and that there are no dependencies. It is a bit of an invitation to build a skyscraper not from the foundation up, but by placing windows, doors, and roof mid-air, in defiance of gravity.

Nor is SDG 4 a plan. SDG 4 as a plan would be utterly meaningless. There is no global plan of action that can faithfully be applied to all countries trying to improve, say, FLN. We have learnt a few things that are true of successful systems, but how those technical principles apply will vary, as we have all learnt from Lant Pritchett, depending on the political and administrative realities of each country. So indeed, choosing to work on FLN does not close the set of options of how to achieve it, nor do I make any such claim.

If, on the other hand, we treat SDG 4 as a set of objectives, this should induce a panic attack because we are undeniably going to fail. There are two responses to the imminence of failure: we give up and chug along, or we set still ambitious but more feasible goals given technical, administrative, political, and fiscal limitations. That is my approach. So, when I look at LICs and LMICs (lower-middle-income countries), my question is: What is the next best thing to aim for, that stretches us out of our zone of comfort but is more achievable?

The World Bank's objective of reducing Learning Poverty (LP) by half represents such an attempt.[1]

Local context matters

By appealing to global actors, I appear insensitive to the fact that education is an eminently local and political affair. My essay was addressed to my colleagues in international organizations, inviting them to step up. I believe they have a role to play to improve the performance of their own organizations and to improve collaboration between them. But I could have done a better job of connecting the dots between the global and the local actors. If I had to reframe my essay, I would start from the classroom, then zoom out to the country context, and then out to the global actors. I would pose the question as: What needs to happen at the classroom level to improve instruction of FLN; are local actors poised to take the necessary actions to enable this; and what role should the global actors play to support the right local action?

Let's make this concrete and take the example of the World Bank's commitment to halve LP by 2030. How does this commitment made at the World Bank's president's level translate into action? The Bank's primary instrument is lending to countries. So, to halve LP, the World Bank needs to have a corresponding loan portfolio to its client countries. But those countries may not want to borrow to meet this particular objective; they might legitimately want to borrow for secondary, tertiary, or vocational education. Even if a country chooses to borrow money to achieve the LP goal, what is the mechanism by which the quality of these loans is ascertained? Do they track learning outcomes? Are there competing programs being implemented in that country? Is there a robust local governance structure that elicits regular review of collective progress against LP, and, if not, how is it being strengthened?

My view is that, having made an institutional commitment to halving LP, it is incumbent on the leadership of the World Bank to align internal incentives and operations to its declared objective. Otherwise, we are left with another grand but hollow promise, of the kind the sector has seen before.

Metrics and accounting

Another set of criticisms my essay received concerns the excessive focus on accountability. I should have been more explicit. I don't believe that weighing the pig makes it fatter. I absolutely think that countries need technical assistance and, in some cases, financial support. Indeed, this is the bread and butter of aid agencies, and it is not my contention that those should be substituted by accountability. Because there are no foolproof policies and plans to improve FLN for all the reasons we know, there needs to be continuous learning and refinement of whatever plan we start with. We know that implementation eats strategy for breakfast. But I am suggesting that technical assistance without performance monitoring and accountability is tacitly saying: we know what to do, let's get it done, what's the point of checking if we are heading in the right direction and at reasonable speed?

The other criticism is that accountability can rapidly devolve into "accounting-based accountability." This is a serious risk. The kind of mutual accountability I promote should be an "account-based" one. By suggesting we keep an eye firmly on learning outcomes, I am not therefore suggesting we track a set of thin inputs. Those will give us a false sense of progress. Take Lesotho: 100 percent of teachers are reported trained (target 4.c), 87 percent of adults are literate (target 4.6.2), 73 percent of children are developmentally on track (target 4.2.1), government expenditure on education is 7 percent of GDP (exceeding the hopes of advocates), yet only 13.2 percent of grade 2/3 students met minimum

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1. Even the World Bank's more "modest" operational target of halving Learning Poverty by 2030 would be a historic achievement – equivalent to countries performing at the 80th percentile in terms of improvements to learning outcomes post-2000. The current work by UNESCO's Institute for Statistics to establish ambitious country-owned objectives should bring us closer to such stretch but achievable goal.

proficiency level for reading (target 4.1.1a). Clearly, blindly tracking a set of thin correlates of learning does not help. We need a more granular understanding of why learning outcomes remain catastrophically low, even though our scorecard of determinants of learning is green. This calls for a detailed review of the binding constraints to learning and of the adequacy of the response offered by the government and aid agencies.

Focus and coalitions

There are two sets of criticisms about the notion of focusing. First, there is no legitimacy to a top-down, imperial focus, and that the job of agencies is simply to support what countries want. Second, it is far from obvious that FLN is the right focus since other areas "are hard to get wrong."

I agree with the first criticism. Thus, in my essay, I don't suggest that a focus on FLN be forced onto countries, by using aid conditionality, for example. Nor do I suggest a wholesale redirecting of domestic or aid funding to FLN: it may not be needed at all. On the contrary, I suggest that agencies, like the World Bank, US Agency for International Development, and UNICEF, work with countries also convinced that they need to improve the quality of their basic education system within their fiscal constraints. I would have labelled this compact as a "coalition of the willing" had the expression not been irretrievably corrupted.

To this, I'll add two points:

- First, an honest country dialogue by aid agencies ought to include a conversation about the quality of basic education. It is not true that aid agencies are just on the receiving end of what countries and civil society want: the exchange of ideas goes both ways; it is not obvious that the demand for gender equity or tobacco control or action on climate change emerged from the bottom up. Global institutions play an important leadership role in developing norms, building consensus, and prompting action.

- Second, to focus is not to suggest that countries work on FLN to the exclusion of everything else.[2] Obviously, governments will need to continue to run their pre-primary, secondary, vocational, and tertiary programs. For me, to focus is to invite a convergence of effort: it is to take the task seriously, to make every effort to understand the root causes of poor performance deeply, to align collective action to addressing those problems, to review progress regularly, and to have an honest conversation (an "account-based" one) about what needs to change. It is the difference between giving us a chance to make meaningful progress against a fundamental SDG 4 objective, versus making no progress at all against any objective.

The other criticism is that governments could spare themselves the heartache of improving FLN by doing other "easier" things, like providing school meals, expanding secondary school seats, etc. Some things are indeed easier, but I doubt we could credibly tell the government of, say the UK, to please limit themselves domestically to providing school meals in response to their own students not meeting minimum proficiency levels in early grades, because it is a "cost-effective" measure. What applies to the UK surely also applies to Malawi in this case. And some things are easier only if we have low expectations. Only 44 percent of Ugandan students complete primary school, of which only 52 percent meet *minimum* proficiency levels for reading. We would also have to make heroic assumptions about recruiting and training specialized secondary school teachers, a problem an order of magnitude more difficult to solve than recruiting primary school teachers. In that context, I can only imagine that when we say we can easily universalize secondary schooling, we mean just frog-marching students through secondary schools even if they don't learn much of anything: we would be promoting a depressingly custodial view of education. In my view, there is no escaping the challenge and the importance of improving learning levels

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2. https://www.cgdev.org/blog/foundational-literacy-and-numeracy-skills-are-important-obviously-are-they-more-important-all

in basic education,[3] precious arguments to the contrary notwithstanding.

Now what?

It remains abundantly clear to me that making progress on something as basic as early grade literacy in LICs and many LMICs will be terribly hard. The key ingredients of focus, performance monitoring and accountability, even in countries that have signed up for improving early grade literacy, are weak or missing. My appeal remains the same: that countries (e.g., World Bank Accelerator countries) and agencies (especially the World Bank, UNICEF, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the US Agency for International Development, and UNESCO's Institute for Statistics) that are seeking to improve learning levels in basic education form a compact. This means an agreement to work together at country level, to create robust feedback loops so we know whether progress is sufficient, to learn from each other, and to have honest conversations about what needs to be changed to accelerate progress. There are already nuclei from which those compacts can be formed, especially but not exclusively the World Bank's Accelerator Program, the Global Partnership for Education country compacts, and the Global Education Forum. We will be watching this space with great interest.

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3. Adducing exhibit A https://riseprogramme.org/publications/role-low-learning-driving-dropout-longitudinal-mixed-methods-study-four-countries

Back to Basics

Manos Antoninis, Director, Global Education Monitoring Report

It is estimated that about 12 million, or a little over 1.5 percent, of children of primary school age have never crossed a school's door and never will, an extreme violation of the right to education. But in a complex world where people require a varied set of skills to escape poverty, the fact that 9 in 10 children in sub-Saharan Africa do not achieve even minimum proficiency in the most basic reading and mathematics skills must be, in terms of scale, the most extreme violation of the right to education, recast as a right to literacy and learning. Girin Beeharry's essay argues that the international community has lost its way, and he calls on us to focus on foundational learning as a single guiding objective. In my reflections here, I look at three ideas from the essay's title: "focus on foundational learning," "global education architecture," and "hold ourselves accountable."

Foundational learning focus

Surely, there can be no question about the need to focus on foundational learning. Or can there? It depends how "focus" is defined. For instance, some countries in Africa historically prioritized primary over secondary education—but this does not make them examples to follow. Among four countries with a (timely) primary completion rate above 80 percent, the secondary completion rate is about 10 percent in Tanzania and Zimbabwe, but almost 30 percent in Zambia and over 40 percent in Kenya. It would be a stretch to say that the first pair of countries were model examples because they prioritized primary education.

Indeed, it is not easy to summarize in one number what prioritizing foundational learning would look like. Low-income countries allocated 47 percent of their education spending to primary education in 2016, down slightly from 49 percent in 2010. How much more would they have to spend to indicate early grades are a bigger priority?

Nor can a focus on foundational learning be equivalent to an exclusive focus on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 4.1 ("ensure all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes") or its associated indicators 4.1.1a and b on minimum learning proficiency. Even if 4.1.1 is the overarching focus, the rest of the SDG 4 agenda remains important, simply because everything is connected in education systems. Well-prepared teachers (target 4.c), who must have advanced through secondary education, need to receive post-secondary education of good quality (target 4.3). Children cannot learn to read when they sit on the floor, have no paper to write on and their brain fries in the heat or they live in fear of their teachers (target 4.a). They will learn to read a lot better if they are better prepared when they enter school (target 4.2), which is supported by literate parents and a literate environment (target 4.6). Experience from conflict-affected or authoritarian countries also suggests that what children read matters for the development of their critical functions; sadly, the world is full of reading materials not meeting such standards (target 4.7). And as the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report emphasized, there is a reason

why inclusion is explicitly mentioned in SDG 4: children's capacity to learn is negatively affected if they are marginalized, if they feel— as many do—that they are not part of the education project (target 4.5).

By all means, a focus on indicators 4.1.1a and b is justified. It is the challenge of a generation. But we need to explain what such a focus implies for an education system and communicate the idea accordingly.

Global actor responsibilities

Girin's call for a focus on foundational learning is, rightly, urgent. Policymakers who set learning objectives and put them at the center of their work, as the 2018 World Development Report urged, can make a big difference, as long as they are honest about these objectives and do not try to manipulate findings.

Many countries have been reluctant to politically commit to such a learning target or have only paid lip service to it. Government bias towards disadvantaged children may be conscious due to elitism or unconscious because officials are simply unaware of the situation.

The latter case results from a culture of measurement being absent. However, criticizing the world's poorest countries for not having developed such technical capacities, or comparing them with the home-grown efforts of well-resourced countries, such as Brazil, India, or Mexico, is harsh. Likewise, externally proposed and wildly optimistic targets on the speed with which learning outcomes can improve need to give way to more realistic analyses of how universalization of education and good quality can go hand in hand.

It is often underestimated that most of the learning gains at *population level* in middle-income countries have been down to improved progression. The percentage of 15-year-olds in the six middle-income countries that took part in the 2003 and 2018 PISA rounds, including Brazil, Indonesia, and Turkey, increased from 50 percent to 75 percent. During this period, the percentage of those reaching minimum proficiency

has stagnated. Yet, this is also progress: in 15 years, education systems absorbed many more disadvantaged adolescents previously not in school.

The need for countries to focus on foundational learning must be communicated with nuance to be effective. One communication challenge is around the crisis narrative. Crises are negative changes. The learning losses currently unfolding due to COVID-19 constitute a serious education crisis. Low learning levels is all that the poorest countries have ever experienced. A crisis narrative can be justified in principle because we believe we can do better and because the current situation is so costly in lost lives and lost potential. But at the same time, we should not underestimate the handicap that African countries start with. Countries that have made rapid progress, such as, say, Cuba or Korea, were monolingual societies with a literate culture and were driven by extraordinary circumstances. We need to set targets that are meaningful so as not to discourage.

Ultimately, Girin's essay is not just about the undeniable need to focus on foundational learning per se, but rather about how to mobilize global actors to support countries to focus on this priority more effectively. He is also fair in saying, in subtle but no uncertain terms, that, just as some public officials in these countries have lost touch and a sense of responsibility towards disadvantaged children, international officials also lose their way.

The reference to the international community's "architecture" draws attention to the ongoing process of reviewing and reforming the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee. Since 2015, country and organizational representation have been below par. Members appear to represent themselves rather than their constituencies. But what should this reform effort be about, and how can it be linked to a stronger focus on foundational learning? This is not a straightforward question but two issues merit attention.

First, putting foundational learning at the center of international cooperation need not be equated with placing the donor perspective at the center. Doing so

risks turning the architecture into a forum of dialogue between the world's richest and poorest countries—and indeed, only some of them. But foundational learning is a global problem deserving global attention. Three in four countries in the world that are neither donors nor aid recipients do not engage in that architecture, even if they are technically among its members. Yet, among them are some countries with the most recent direct experience of tackling the challenge of improving foundational learning and could be brought in to helpfully contribute to the debate, including the Brazils, Indias, and Mexicos of this world.

By contrast, donor countries' aid agencies do not necessarily possess a comparative advantage in education delivery. It is rare that ministries of development talk to and learn from their peers in ministries of education. And while aid could, in principle, make a difference in low-income countries, where it accounts for 18 percent of total spending (a misleading statistic considering how a large part of that aid is spent), levels of foundational learning are almost as low in lower-middle-income countries where aid accounts for less than 2 percent of total spending. The global architecture needs to move beyond an aid-centric view of the problem. It needs to bring the perspective of countries that progressed rapidly and the perspective of regional entities that engage their member states in productive dialogue on education.

This brings me to the second point on the architecture, in which I fully agree with Girin. Instead of finance, the international community should put data and monitoring at the center. Countries bear the responsibility for improving their education systems. The influence of external financing will be marginal unless the initiative and drive comes from governments. Offering a picture of where countries stand through reliable data remains a key mechanism through which external actors can energize countries. There are many valid criticisms of this argument: yes, globally comparable data have not moved the needle in many countries, nor can such data in and of themselves bring change to classrooms. But these criticisms should not distract us

from acknowledging that the international architecture has at least partly underperformed because it has lacked (i) data for all countries on key indicators; (ii) standards against which progress can be assessed; and (iii) willingness to use data and monitoring to trigger policy dialogue.

Holding ourselves accountable

A quick reading of Girin's paper may suggest that it is overplaying the role of international actors. But in fact, it is careful in focusing on selected actions ("a few things done better"), which are both discreet and discrete, that can bring substantive change. Girin calls on members of the international community to recognize their responsibilities and reflect. I will focus on three issues: data, research, and evaluation.

Data

The SDG 4 monitoring framework has brought significant change in education, broadening the sources of data and the range of issues. But large gaps remain, especially with learning achievement data. Ensuring that every country has a sample-based assessment of good quality every three to five years is no small thing. On the demand side, many countries have not fulfilled their responsibility to report on global indicators since the UN Economic and Social Committee approved the SDG monitoring framework in 2017. On the supply side, ensuring that assessment data are of sufficient quality and comparable is not just a technical but also a hugely political exercise, which the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) has been pursuing with commitment and diplomacy. What is asked of donors is to ensure, national or cross-national, assessments are funded and help build country capacity.

However, donors have failed this test of development cooperation effectiveness, even though it is a low-hanging fruit. Worse, rather than helping solve any of the challenges outlined above, donors appear to be adding to them. At the time of the last Global Partnership for Education replenishment in Dakar in 2018,

the UIS and the Global Education Monitoring Report estimated that donors needed to provide $60 million per year above what they already spent to fill the gap in learning assessments and household surveys in low- and lower-middle-income countries. The amount is small. If disbursed in an organized way, based on a coordinated plan to support national or cross-national assessments, it would be effective and efficient. Instead, donors work in an uncoordinated way, if they do not compete with each other, to fund some assessments in some countries. As an attempt by the UIS to document these efforts in a so-called virtual registry has shown, donors do not even know what assessments they fund. Such donor behaviour not only has not helped improve the evidence base but also perpetuates an oligopolistic market structure for learning assessments, with all the negative consequences for countries and their potential to develop capacity.[1]

Research

Building national capacity is the quintessence of development cooperation. Yet, the donor record is also weak on research, or "knowledge generation" as defined in the paper. Here, I draw a different conclusion. Low- and lower-middle-income countries do not need "compendiums of promising innovations" or "advisory panels" but solid basic and applied research to answer fundamental questions:

- How can we best teach malnourished children?
- What can substitute for the lack of a literate environment to generate demand for reading?
- How can teachers be prepared to address the needs of children with severe disadvantages?
- How can reforms that use home language as a basis succeed operationally? And so on.

In the Global North, we rely upon real compendiums, like those of John Hattie, which are based on literally hundreds of studies for individual sub-questions of those listed above, which, almost exclusively, are in the English language. So why do we think that low- and lower-middle-income countries do not need a similar, if not a larger, amount of research, given how much more complex their education problems are? At the end of the day, a substantive focus on foundational learning cannot be achieved without a lively national research community that lobbies their governments to pay attention.

Donor-funded research typically produces knowledge outside the context of countries that need it, and it is fair to question whether they help countries develop the capacity they need. Such knowledge stays mostly with researchers in the Global North and may not help bring change in low- and lower-middle-income countries. The donor community should instead help produce such a cadre of researchers in the Global South who will care about early literacy and numeracy and will answer such research questions. Agriculture's CGIAR, a partnership that united international organizations engaged in research on food security since the 1970s, was mostly based in the Global South and helped build expertise in the Global South. Donors should explore whether they could transpose this experience into education.

Evaluation

Girin's paper points at the "yawning gap" between what we know and what donors "choose to do." The long list of "well-intentioned partnerships, specialized financing facilities, commissions, committees, platforms, initiatives, and forums" he names is a thinly veiled criticism of misguided donor efforts. It pays to ask how we ended up with so many, and how we can reverse this situation to streamline processes through one political and one financial mechanism—those that were established for that purpose by the international community. Girin rightly points out that "we are not learning and adapting our work." Sometimes, it feels that the rate at which donors improve their learning

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1. Silvia Montoya and Luis Crouch, 2019. " The learning assessment market: pointers for countries – part 1 and part 2." World Education Blog.

does not differ from the rate at which children in the poorest countries improve their learning.

For instance, the most successful programs at scale have been carried out in collaboration with government. Yet, many bilateral donors often bypass governments. At least half of aid is project-based and not running through government systems. Sometimes UN organizations seem to strive more for visibility than for impact. The World Bank has not had its work on primary education independently evaluated since the early 2000s, hard as that might be to believe, considering that learning has been the cornerstone of its strategy since 2011. It may reflect an implicit recognition that the challenge is more complex than development organizations publicly admit and that there are few off-the-shelf solutions. Collectively, donors appear driven by internal organizational objectives, which lead development partners to compete instead of cooperating to solve complex problems. Improving such cooperation is perhaps the area where the Global Partnership for Education has focused least, even though it was at the heart of its project.

Conclusion

Girin's call to the international community to improve the way it works will be one to which we will return. It may well become the benchmark against which we will measure ourselves in 2030. And he is absolutely right in not being apologetic for using accountability to demand consistency and singular commitment to a goal: "periodic stock of progress, to reflect on the reasons why we are or aren't making any, and to alter the course of our action as required" is the minimum to ask of anyone who disburses or receives public money. His call is to put the student at the center.

The GEM Report is currently committing efforts in two directions. First, it supports the UIS in the development of benchmarks, a neglected commitment of the Framework for Action, including a benchmark on foundational learning. Their absence has made the assessment of progress less rigorous. It has deprived countries of realistic stretch targets. It has also deprived regional entities of a good entry point for policy dialogue. Second, it is embarking in the development of a regional report on foundational learning in Africa working with partners and researchers in the continent. It aims to bring the comparative and independent perspectives of its research together in the service of this overarching goal. One of the key mechanisms it will use is to work through partnerships to bring foundational learning to the attention of continental leaders. In addition to these two activities, we stand ready to collaborate with other members of the international community to turn the vision expressed in Girin's paper into reality.

Playing Catch Up: The Role of Foundational Literacy in Achieving SDG 4

Caitlin Baron, Chief Executive Officer, Luminos Fund

2020 shook the very foundations of education around the world. After dramatic progress in the first decade of this century in expanding access to the classroom, 1.6 billion children were cast out of school.[1] Today, an additional 24 million children are at risk of dropping out of school in COVID's aftermath.[2] Not only is Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 at risk, but Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 is as well. To return to the right course, the global education community must refocus and renew our priorities; in this, Girindre Beeharry provides us with a much-needed cornerstone for change.

Lessons from my own organization and experience align in many ways with Girindre's call to arms. In this piece I aim to show that a focus on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) is indeed fundamental to advancing educational opportunity across the globe, and I hold a mirror to some the sector's efforts so far. By outlining some stumbling blocks that education funders have faced in the past, I hope to ensure that we

capture this once-in-a-lifetime moment to move forward, not pull back.

As Girindre outlines clearly in his essay on the pathway to progress on SDG 4, focusing on literacy in the first three grades is essential to inclusive and equitable quality education. In low-income countries, where nearly 90 percent of children aged 10 are unable to read with comprehension, it is not only the first hurdle to overcome, but the foundation of any real progress within SDG 4's broader agenda.[3]

Prioritizing universal FLN in low-income countries rightly forces the global education community to acknowledge that foundational skills are the gateway to all later learning. Second, it expands our lens to focus on education outcomes for children who are in school, but also, crucially, for those who are out of the system. And lastly, it compels us to "reach the furthest behind first."[4] Girindre's conviction is radical because it lays bare the global education community's relative lack of focus to date in improving education outcomes, and

1. Karboul, Amel., (2020) "COVID-19 put 1.6 billion children out of school. Here's how to upgrade education post-pandemic." *Weforum.org*. World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/12/covid19-education-innovation-outcomes/
2. Fore, Henrietta., (2020) "UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore's remarks at a press conference on new updated guidance on school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19." *UNICEF.org*. UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-executive-director-henrietta-fores-remarks-press-conference-new-updated
3. Azevedo, João Pedro, et al. (2019) "Ending Learning Poverty: What will it take?" *Openknowledge.worldbank.org*. World Bank. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/32553/142659.pdf?sequence=7
4. "Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development.", *Sustainabledevelopment.un.org*. UN. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf

the frequent disconnect between policy pronouncements and calls for further funding from the top with actual results for teaching and learning in the classroom. By placing universal FLN at the center, we can set clear and measurable targets to which we can then hold ourselves accountable. To achieve and track real progress, consistent, regular, and relevant data—currently missing from the UIS and the Global Education Monitoring Report—is essential.

Girindre's focus on FLN is especially helpful in that it centers our attention on a clear-eyed understanding of need, and calls on us to note that gaps in FLN are more similar than different for girls and boys. Indeed, if nine in 10 children in low-income countries cannot read by their tenth birthday, we know with certainty that this is a problem for both genders.

As Kirsty Newman says, "because we see education as a solution to gender inequality… we make the mistake of thinking that gender inequality in education is the biggest priority. In fact… girls' foundational learning levels are generally not worse than boys."[5] And, research shows that even when the goal of an intervention is to increase solely girls' learning, those interventions that have targeted both boys and girls have delivered the same impact for girls as those that focus on girls alone.[6] This subtlety is important because it means we need not waste time searching for FLN solutions uniquely designed for girls. Broad-based FLN solutions are the strongest way to improve outcomes for girls as well as boys.

A school system that keeps children in a classroom for six years or more without teaching them to read fundamentally does not value children's time, no matter their gender. On behalf of every child, we need to demand more.

But what does getting FLN right really mean at the level of the child? As a child, I learned from my own family what a strong foundation of learning really means. My grandmother would tell me how she grew up in a village where girls went to school through grade three and boys through grade five, and that was the end of their educational journeys. With just three years of reasonably high-quality schooling though, she could read the Bible, balance a check book, and sign a mortgage. Not to mention raise five children who went on to fulfill their full potential, collecting a series of university degrees along the way. I share this not to celebrate how incredible my grandmother was, though she was, but rather to make the point that even three years of schooling can be remarkably impactful if delivered well.

Achieving FLN at scale

Luminos's Second Chance programs in Ethiopia and Liberia show that first-generation readers can advance from reading five words per minute to 39 words per minute in merely 10 months. Through careful iteration and evaluation, we have enabled over 152,000 out-of-school children to get up to grade level and back to learning.

Along the way, we have learned a few things that are relevant to achieving FLN at scale. We know these lessons can be applied to help make FLN a reality for all. No child should be denied the right to be able to read, write, and do basic math, and the global education community has the power to ensure this happens.

Access versus quality is a false dichotomy

Against the backdrop of the many disappointments of international education detailed in Girindre's piece, the expansion of access to basic schooling around the globe is a shining achievement that merits far more celebration.

Before the pandemic, the proportion of children out of primary and secondary school fell from 26 percent

5. Newman, Kirsty., "Yes to girls' education – but let's focus on absolute not relative outcomes", *Riseprogramme.org*. Rise Programme. https://riseprogramme. org/blog/girls-education-absolute-not-relative-outcomes?utm_source=social&utm_medium=post&utm_campaign=social_media
6. Evans, David K., and Fei Yuan. (2019) "What we learn about girls' education from interventions that do not focus on girls", *CGDEV.org*. CGD. https://www. cgdev.org/sites/default/files/what-we-learn-about-girls-education-interventions-do-not-focus-on-girls.pdf

in 2000 to 17 percent in 2018.[7] In 1998, it is estimated 381 million children were out of school. By 2014, this number fell to 263 million.[8] This proves the possible: real progress can be made when the world's education actors are galvanized around a clear, common goal, like the second MDG.

Yet the COVID pandemic threatens all that progress: even three-month school closures can cause students to fall an entire year behind.[9] The significance of these closures is weightiest in the Global South, where some children are missing out on nearly a sixth of their total expected lifetime learning.[10]

The global education community has spent too much time since the penning of the SDGs in debating the merits of education access versus education quality. Girindre's essay and the World Bank's new focus on Learning Poverty make clear that this is a false dichotomy, especially post-COVID. A drive to ensure all children learn to read with meaning by age 10 puts our focus on both access and quality, on efforts to improve instruction quality inside early grade classrooms, and on ensuring the one in five African children who still never even make it through the schoolhouse door actually have the chance to get inside.

Learning from global health

Focusing on foundational literacy is the gateway to further learning, and the foundation for unlocking better health, stronger democracy, and so much more. There is good news: even the least-resourced countries have the capabilities to deliver on FLN. At Luminos, our experience training non-formal or community teachers demonstrates that the human capital to unlock early literacy for all children already exists everywhere.

Our program shows the promise of community teachers, especially for countries with a seemingly insurmountable teacher shortage. The global teacher shortage stands at nearly 69 million teachers; 70 percent of this shortfall is in sub-Saharan Africa. The global community needs an education infantry to deliver FLN—fast.[11] Many countries cannot graduate teachers at a rate that could fill the shortfall: South Sudan would need all of its projected graduates from higher education—twice over—to become teachers to fill its gap. The sector must be bold and think outside the box to provide basic and remedial education, as global health has to provide basic healthcare.

Useful lessons can be drawn from global health's embrace of community health workers as a "last mile" extension to overstretched public health systems. Pratham's success with the "Balsakhi" model—where tutors from the community worked with local school children—alongside Luminos's work training community teachers, proves that high-potential young adults with minimal formal training can deliver transformative impact in FLN rates where it is needed most: rural, hard-to-reach areas.[12]

Reduced class size in the early years is essential for success

Entry-level literacy, especially for first-generation readers, requires a class size where the teacher can have a basic sense of each child's learning level. My experience suggests that, heroic outliers aside, most teachers cannot effectively teach many more than 40 children to learn to read at one time.

In our program at Luminos, children begin the year at uniformly basic learning levels, but by midyear we

7. "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", unstats.un.org. UN. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/Goal-04/
8. Roser, Max., and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina. (2016) "Global Education", ourworldindata.org. Our World in Data. https://ourworldindata.org/global-education
9. Andrabi, Tahir., Benjamin Daniels and Jishnu Das., (2020) "Human Capital Accumulation and Disasters: evidence from the Pakistan earthquake of 2005", *riseprogramme.org.* Rise Programme. https://riseprogramme.org/publications/human-capital-accumulation-and-disasters-evidence-pakistan-earthquake-2005
10. Evans, David., Susannah Hares, Amina Mendez Acosta and Christelle Saintis., (2021) "It's been a year since schools started to close due to Covid-19", *CGDEV. org,* CGD. https://www.cgdev.org/blog/its-been-year-schools-started-close-due-covid-19
11. Montoya, Silvia., and Vikas Pota., (2016) "Closing the Teacher Gap: Almost 69 Million Teachers Needed", *uis.unesco.org,* UNESCO. http://uis.unesco.org/en/blog/closing-teacher-gap-almost-69-million-teachers-needed
12. Banerjee et al, 2007; Luminos, 2017.

find a wide dispersion of literacy levels within the same classroom. For a teacher to ensure every child in her class learns to read, she needs a small enough group to allow for some understanding of individual learning levels and differentiated instruction. Larger class sizes are never ideal, but older children are better able to navigate this constraint. Once literacy is achieved, it is possible for children to continue to grasp new learning, even when taught through a passive "chalk and talk" model, with limited individual engagement between teacher and learner, as is typical of large classes. But— and this is crucial—the key gatekeeping event is literacy, and smaller classes facilitate achieving that.

Reflections for education funders on driving change

I write as someone with 15 years in the international education space: 10 years at a leading international education foundation and now 5 years at the helm of the Luminos Fund. I am honored to be featured alongside this esteemed list of researchers, though I am very much not a researcher myself. Instead, I write from my lived experience, having had the rare pleasure of serving on both sides of the desk, as funder and fund-seeker. From this perspective, there are three key provocations I would like to share with funders seeking to drive bold change in international education.

Girindre persuasively highlights the shortage of investment in research and insight in international education relative to global health. While education research may indeed be underfunded, I wonder if a lack of knowledge about what works is truly a barrier to entry for a funder seeking a profound impact in international education?

Reviewing a selection of proven yet diverse FLN interventions that deliver high impact—Pratham's Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)[13], RTI's Tusome project, and

Luminos, for example—a number of shared elements can be discerned:

- Successful delivery of operational basics, including some form of textbooks, learning materials, and, ideally, midday meals
- Simple assessments at classroom level that allow for a tight dialogue between teaching and learning, enabling teachers to meet children where they are
- Activities that allow children to learn by doing
- Some form of scripted instruction, providing a roadmap for success in the classroom, especially for newer and less prepared teachers
- Project or systemwide efforts to manage from data, driving problem solving and accountability for performance

Indeed, there is an emerging consensus that some version of the above list is at the core of almost every successful FLN intervention in the sector.[14] It may not be as certain as a "Copenhagen Consensus," but more than enough information is available for a smart, strategic funder to take bold action. Moreover, the learning that will come from moving forward with what we know and evaluating as work advances is far more valuable than what can be achieved by analyzing from the sidelines.

As courage for the uncertain journey ahead, I offer three key reflections on international education philanthropic strategy from my own professional journey:

The who and the how versus the what

The rise of the importance of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in education has brought many important insights to the fore and allowed for the equally important result of setting aside interventions that simply do not work. An unfortunate side effect of RCTs in the education space, however, is that these studies have

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13. "Teaching at the Right Level to improve learning", *povertyactionlab.org*, Poverty Action Lab. https://www.povertyactionlab.org/case-study/teaching-right-level-improve-learning

14. Evans, David K., and Anna Popova., (2016) "What Really Works to Improve Learning in Developing Countries? : An Analysis of Divergent Findings in Systematic Reviews" *open.knowledge.worldbank.org*, World Bank Group. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/29308

at times fueled the search for silver bullets. Too often, education grantmaking strategy has centered on the choice of model of intervention, rather than the quality of the *implementation* of a model.

Even the most evaluated and celebrated international education intervention in recent time, TaRL, provides ample proof that selecting a powerful model alone is insufficient to guarantee success. While this model has an appropriately renowned track record of success, of the 15 evaluations cited on TaRL's website, six show little to no material impact on student results. Alongside the conclusion that meeting children where they are is a vital component of successful teaching and learning, we must arrive at the equally important conclusion that *who* delivers the intervention and *how* (including elements of both context and quality) *matters*.

As a sector, we should place greater value on the *teams* doing the work. In education, implementation is everything: the who and the how are at least as important as the what, if not more so.

For a funder, this means balancing a focus on evaluation data with the long, sometimes expensive investment in building the capability to gather, analyze, and action operating data. Our funders at Luminos love to see our past external evaluations, but it is our real-time management data that enables us to deliver targeted, transformative education to the children sitting in our classrooms today. For funders, I urge directing more support to organizations invested in the long-term, iterative search for sustainable impact, and less towards large-scale but time-bound projects that often leave little behind when they conclude. Furthermore, I urge funders to invest in the development of in-house measurement systems that make it possible for organizations to advance the ongoing, iterative search for impact.

Cursing the darkness versus lighting a candle

Girindre's piece rightfully calls out the struggles and shortcomings of the major multilateral institutions in their quest to materially advance the quality of education around the globe. Changing some of the in-built challenges in the global education aid infrastructure will be hard though, and with uncertain success. Meanwhile there are simpler education investments, with more straightforward paths to catalytic impact, waiting to be made.

There is a rising cohort of international education NGOs ready to do far more good for the world, if only they had the financial support to further scale. I recognize I may seem an imperfect messenger for this call to action, as the head of one such NGO. But I make this claim, in heartfelt truth, on behalf of a broader coalition of excellent organizations doing remarkable work to expand educational opportunities for children globally: the Citizens Foundation, Educate!, PEAS, Rising Academies, Young love, the entire membership of the Global Schools Forum, and many more. These high-impact organizations are underpowered financially. It would be an easy—and transformational—win for a foundation to invest sustained, flexible, mezzanine-style funding to take these proven models to true scale.

An important consideration to highlight here is that it is not necessary to choose out-of-school children over girls' education or over early childhood development. Each organization above is a proven winner on their piece of the education puzzle. The world's children would be far better off if this cohort of organizations could pursue our respective missions at some multiple of our current sizes. While lasting change in education inevitably means working within government systems, there is no effective way to do this without high-quality partners to support that engagement, and this is where high-impact, under-funded NGOs come in.

The potential for impact from a greatly expanded tier of international education NGOs should be resonant for those coming from a global health perspective. While global health has long been criticized for focusing on "vertical" or disease-centered initiatives (malaria, HIV, etc.) at the expense of mainstream health systems,

this focus has also driven a revolution in health outcomes around the world. These vertical initiatives have time and again made the case to donor agencies and national governments of the positive return on global health investments. In short, this "problem" of global health is one the international education sector would love to have. Investing in scaling up high-impact international education NGOs is a risk worth taking.

Getting out of one's own way

Leading a major portfolio at a foundation means operating in a world of awesome possibility and weighty responsibility, as I know from my decade as a leader at the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation. All that flexible capital naturally requires a razor sharp, insight-based strategy to guide its effective deployment. But true philanthropic wisdom involves allowing the occasional freedom to set aside rigid strategies (however elegant they may seem) and simply fund great things, regardless of how they map to a fixed strategic plan—and I say this as someone who also spent the first seven years of her career as a strategy consultant.

Anthony Bugg-Levine, another recovering strategy consultant, wrote of his time at the Rockefeller Foundation: "like most foundations, ours had a strategy and looked for grantees undertaking specific projects that fit into it. But great nonprofits have their own strategies. By pushing many of them to fit into a specific type of restricted funding, I risked not getting their best."[15] When you fund exclusively against your own strategy, you close yourself off to the possibility that anyone else in the sector might have a good idea of which you had not yet thought.

Careful research and deep diligence are important when planning a grant portfolio, but real learning comes ultimately from doing and applying that same rigor to evaluating the journey of the work, not simply the choice of destination.

In education in particular, we need to create space for just a little bit of magic: incredible successes we cannot quite explain lest we "dissect the bird trying to find the song." Imagine if the philanthropists who funded Maria Montessori's Casa dei Bambini had insisted on knowing the neuroscience behind sensorial education before committing to support the scaling of her work. Would we now have one of the most scaled and impactful education models the world has ever seen? Taking the occasional risk on something new, different, or unproven is one of the great joys of philanthropy, and very much to be cherished.

Answering Girindre's call to arms

If there is one thing our sector needs more than anything else, it is bright, passionate minds, unwilling to compromise with the status quo of incremental progress, and hell-bent on making good on the promise of universal access to a quality basic education. As such, those of us in the sector feel the loss as Girindre steps away from his fulltime role at the Gates Foundation all the more palpably.

I first met Girindre when I had just transitioned from 10 years at a foundation into the role of NGO leader, and he had just made the leap from the world of global health to that of international education. We have enjoyed trading fish-out-of-water reflections on the fresh perspective that comes from taking up new, complex things. He treated me to a few warp-speed tours of the Gates Foundation's evolving strategic vision in international education, keeping me on my toes as he bounced effortlessly from RCT findings to national education budgets to pedagogic frameworks. It was a privilege to be in the room with him. I have watched with admiration and a small touch of jealousy as he went on to build a grant portfolio funding all of my very favorite international education researchers to tackle some of the most pressing questions of our time.

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15. Bugg-Levine., Antony (2019) "Questions I wish I'd asked", *Philanthropy.com*, The Chronicle of Philanthropy. https://www.philanthropy.com/article/questions-i-wish-id-asked/?cid=gen_sign_in

It is hard to imagine someone having a greater impact on the international education sector in a shorter period of time than Girindre. He has gifted our sector with so many important insights, but his most important legacy is the searing and inspiring call to action in his essay last month.

Education is hard, and messy, and slow to show results, but it is the only truly lasting social investment we can make. Girindre poses the essential question to each of us in his piece. Complex and difficult as it is to get education right, what more worthy challenge could we possibly choose for our "one wild and precious life"?

The (Mis)Alignment of Global and National Priorities for Education

Lee Crawfurd and Susannah Hares

"Education, Education, Education!" declared Prime Minister Tony Blair, as he laid out priorities for his government after his resounding election victory in 1997. In the decade that followed, Blair's government recruited 35,000 teachers, cut class sizes, increased teacher pay, built 1,000 new schools, introduced compulsory literacy and numeracy time in primary schools to drive up standards, and launched innovations like the academies programme.

Blair had the fortune of presiding over a rich economy, and he lavished cash on the education sector. Core per pupil funding rose by nearly 50 percent in real terms over the decade. The *only* priority was raising standards, whatever it took.

Developing countries don't have a lot of cash to lavish. In *The Pathway to Progress on SDG 4*, Girin Beeharry notes that trade-offs are made all the time because there is simply not enough money to go around. And so, amid a plethora of needs, Girin urges donors to prioritise foundational numeracy and literacy—early grade reading and numeracy programmes—with close monitoring of progress and strong accountability for results.

It's a compelling essay, exploiting Girin's front-row seat to the deliberations of the education aid architecture over the last few years to make cutting insights and concrete and provocative proposals to address what he sees as the failures of the industry. And it's a rare call for urgent prioritisation in a sector that prefers to demand more money than discuss where trade-offs need to be made.

Prioritisation: Everywhere and nowhere

As Girin notes, it's impossible for member-state organisations like UNESCO or constituency-based organisations like the Global Partnership for Education to prioritise. They must serve all their members and constituents. And it's almost impossible for governments to prioritize just one aspect of education. Their citizens have a range of views on what is important. So, with citizen preferences and donor influence at play, should governments in developing countries prioritise early grade literacy and numeracy?

If governments care only (or mostly) about achieving mass human capital, then there is a case to be made for prioritising early grade literacy and numeracy.

We see two principal objections. First, there are precious few examples of success to point to. Making foundational literacy and numeracy a priority aim does not mean that governments or donors know what to do to achieve this aim.

Second, parents and governments do—and should—have other priorities that are just as legitimate as building mass human capital—socialisation and child wellbeing, for example.

It may be fair to prioritise foundational skills if the goal is achieving mass human capital

The case for prioritising early grade reading and maths over other educational goals is that foundational learning is a critical input into other learning goals. Without ensuring universal basic literacy and numeracy, children may gain little additional learning from expanding access to preschool or secondary school.

The argument makes good sense. The *association* between foundational skills and subsequent cognitive ability and staying in school for longer (with all the benefits that brings) has a wide array of evidence behind it. There is also good evidence for the *association* between foundational skills and adult outcomes, and even human capital investments in the next generation. However, as Girin points out, there is not (yet) convincing *causal* evidence on the link between foundational skills and these life outcomes. It is not possible to isolate the impact of foundational skills from a host of other characteristics (e.g., parental support) that might be associated with those skills.

While foundational skills yield certain inarguable benefits, the case for prioritizing them ahead of all other human capital investments—early childhood education or universal secondary education, for example—remains to be made quantitatively.

Those interested in increasing momentum for the early grade reading and maths agenda would do well to prioritise research that disentangles the link between foundational skills and better life outcomes from other factors.

An important part of this is first showing that it is even possible to improve foundational skills at scale, and then second, showing that such efforts do indeed yield the hoped-for downstream benefits. One way of doing this would be through following up on big foundational literacy randomized controlled trials, such as the Tusome programme in Kenya. By measuring the long-term outcomes of children who received (and did not receive) interventions that have successfully improved foundational skills, we can understand whether foundational skills have a causal relationship with better life outcomes. If this is indeed the case, education donors will have a stronger argument for investments to improve foundational skills.

For literacy and numeracy to be a priority, governments need a better grip on student learning

For governments to prioritise investments in foundational skills, they need to know if they have a problem, and how to fix it. The premise of the ASER and Uwezo surveys conducted for the last decade in South Asia and East Africa is that without widespread understanding of low learning levels, little action will be taken.

In a paper to be published later this year, Crawfurd et al. (2021) interviewed 924 education officials from 36 low- and middle-income countries, finding that knowledge of the state of literacy and numeracy levels in their country was low. Whilst the majority (80 percent) agreed in the abstract that there is a learning crisis, most drastically under-state the scale of the problem. When asked to estimate the share of students that can read by the age of 10, the majority (79 percent) overestimate.

On average, officials estimated that 63 percent of children can read by age 10. This compares to World Bank estimates based on actual national learning assessments for the same 36 countries of just 25 percent. Whilst estimates of learning are poor, officials are much better at accurately estimating the amount of schooling children receive and per pupil spending.

A lack of understanding that there is a problem to address is clearly one barrier to greater investment in foundational skills. Another barrier is a lack of belief in the availability of solutions. A common view is that education systems have often focused more on identifying

Figure 1. Estimated versus actual number of children who can read at age 10
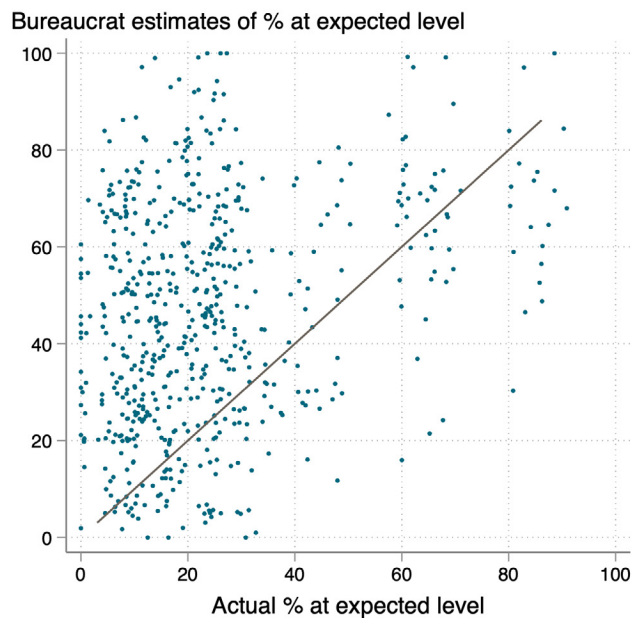
Notes: Actual percentage at expected level is the inverse of "learning poverty." Learning poverty estimates are available for five countries, with the remaining 31 estimated using harmonised learning outcome scores (Crawfurd et al., 2021).

or selecting the most talented students for higher education than on building universal skills (Muralidharan and Singh 2021). A related idea is Carol Dweck's concept of "growth mindset." People with a growth mindset think that intelligence is not fixed but can be improved with effort. Crawfurd et al. (2021) assessed the growth mindset of government officials. The majority (64 percent) believe that intelligence is *fixed*. If governments don't truly believe that some children are capable of learning, it seems unlikely that they will.

Governments (and citizens) do (and should) care about more than just human capital

Despite efforts by some donors to concentrate public spending on primary education, the reality is that governments in *every country* care about more than the accumulation of human capital.

Policymakers spend large shares of education budgets on secondary education, and universal secondary education has been a popular manifesto pledge in African elections for many years (although notably, as discussed above, it's not clear that investments in foundational skills are any more effective at human capital accumulation than investments in universal secondary education).

It's well documented that historically a central role of education systems has been the socialisation of citizens. For example, US states adopted universal schooling as a nation-building tool to instil American civic values to the diverse waves of migrants during the "Age of Mass Migration" from 1850 to 1914 (Bandiera et al. 2018).

But how much weight do policy makers place on different goals of education systems? Crawfurd et al. (2021) asked officials to make a set of quantitative trade-offs between different objectives— universal basic skills, universal schooling, or socialising children to become "dutiful citizens." Of these three, the production of "dutiful citizens" is valued more than the other outcomes. Quantitatively, a dutiful citizen is worth *50 percent more* to officials than a child learning how to read.

It's not just what officials care about that matters. As Girin notes, there is not enough electoral demand for quality primary education. In a democracy, governments respond to citizen preferences. And it's not clear that citizens prioritise literacy either. Uwezo, an annual household-based survey that measures children's literacy and numeracy, tested 130,000 kids in their 2014 survey and found that only 30 percent of grade three kids were able to do grade two work, dropping to just 25 percent of kids in rural areas.

Following the release of the survey data, researchers reported the dire results of the tests to a randomly assigned group of 550 Kenyan households. The information had no effect. Parents who received the information were no more likely than other parents to take

Figure 2. Officials' goals for education systems

Education system goals:
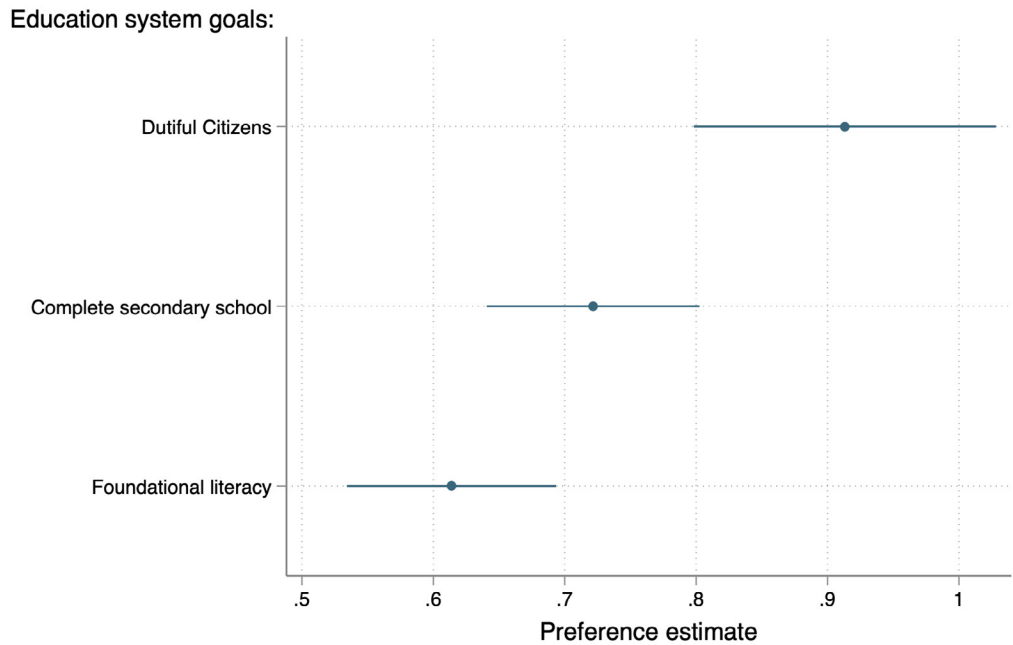
Source: Crawfurd et al., (2021).

action at school or in the public sphere to improve the quality of their children's schooling, or to adopt behaviors at home that might have a positive impact on their children's learning.

Keeping children safe matters at least as much as learning

Developing countries have preferences for the outcomes of their education system and they have priorities for new investments and interventions. Donors should help support those priorities, rather than impose top-down global priorities on them. But where donors do influence priorities, it's a puzzle to us why donors do not do more to ensure that children are safe in school, to protect the real foundation for education.

Girls and boys face significant rates of physical and sexual violence in school, often by their teachers. While we lack reliable and up-to-date data about the scale and nature of school violence, various surveys shed light on the crisis. PISA for Development, for example, a set of education assessments focused on developing

countries, asks students if they have experienced unwanted or inappropriate language or touching by their teachers. One in eight boys and girls in Senegal and Zambia report having been sexually harassed by a teacher or staff member within the last four weeks.

Donor efforts to run literacy interventions in school will be worth little if girls and boys are assaulted by their teachers in their classrooms.

Conclusion

Girin's call for a frank discussion about priorities is welcome in a sector where such conversations are rare. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the international community is making urgent calls to protect—and even increase—education spending. But we know difficult trade-offs will need to be made, and Girin's manifesto should be in the minds of all education leaders as they consider those trade-offs. And his sense of urgency is much needed in a sector that seems to drift further and further away from the 2030 SDG targets, with no plan to get back on track.

Figure 3. Percentage of 15-year-olds reporting sexual harassment at school by a teacher or other staff member in last four weeks
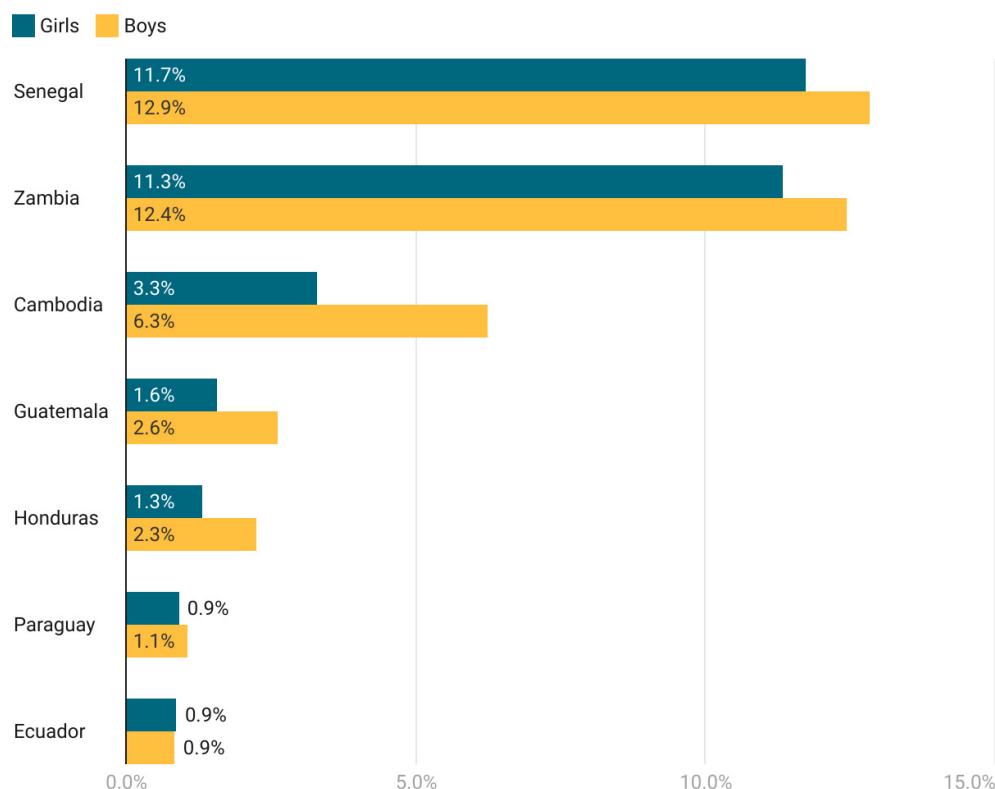
Source: Crawfurd and Hares 2020

Girin makes the case to invest in foundational skills better than anyone. But, urging donors to prioritise early grade reading and math, when developing countries have multiple, legitimate, goals for their education system, is problematic. It's important to note, however, that Girin is not demanding that priorities shift wholesale—instead, he suggests that a "coalition of the willing", i.e., those already persuaded of the need to prioritize early grade literacy and numeracy.

We could be more persuaded if the limitations we describe above were addressed first: better causal evidence demonstrating the link between foundational skills and life outcomes, and an urgent and primary focus on making children safe from harm in school.

Individual parents, children, and elected governments may all differ in their goals and ambitions from education. But we don't think learning to read is an unambiguously higher priority than avoiding child abuse.

Girin's essay will make a mark on the sector. His intolerance of the learning crisis shines a light on our collective failure to agree and implement practical steps to fulfil the promise of education for those who need it most. Girin's passion for progress is palpable, and now—nine years before the SDGs expire—is the time for the sector to take heed and take action. Things can only get better.

Finding Room for Optimism on Foundational Learning

Luis A. Crouch, Senior Economist, RTI International

Girin Beeharry's essay, with its rousing call to action and accountability, is both wise and shrewd. It is wise in that it focuses on the strategic issue of foundational learning, arguing that it is a war worth fighting. But it is also shrewd in being tactical, acknowledging that some of the battles in the war may not be worth fighting.

Here's how Girin puts it:

> *I would passionately like my pessimism to be proven wrong. In the meantime, my proposed solution is to cut the Gordian knot by building on what we have, inviting tactical shifts by a few actors, leaving the architecture as it is, and side-stepping the vexing prioritization issue by simply working with countries and agencies already persuaded of the need to prioritize [Foundational Literacy and Numeracy, or FLN]. The opportunity is seeing greater convergence of late of a few major actors around FLN as a priority objective: the World Bank's Foundational Learning Compact (FLC), seeks to support 'accelerator' countries in their bid to improve FLN; USAID has been the agency most sharply focused on 'all children reading' in the last decade and continues to be a prominent investor in this area; UNICEF launched a 'mission-approach' to FLN. There is also the cumulated knowledge of many local and international NGOs which have worked on this particular problem for a decade or more. While the FLC is a promising nugget to build from, it will require the same ingredients of maintained focus, performance monitoring and accountability structures to motivate real progress.*

The wisdom of fighting the war is the point of Girin's essay, so I won't expand on it. The shrewdness is in his suggestion to leave the architecture as is and to work by building on what we already have. The toughest bit, where the tactical merit and hence the shrewdness is perhaps open to debate, is "inviting tactical shifts by a few actors."

In this essay, I point out the bits of pessimism that I share with Girin, but I also debate him where I think there is room for some optimism.

The attraction of the lowest common denominator

I'll start with an issue on which I share Girin's pessimism but that I also believe may not be tactically worth the fight: inducing even marginal, but meaningful, tactical shifts by some of the relevant international agencies. I won't name names, but many agencies just have too much of a political responsibility, and maybe a legitimate one, to be all things to all people, even if it means doing only the simplest, least risky things. Or things that sound daring but are vaporous enough to require little effort to achieve (if they are achievable at all). Why work hard at painting the air a promised beautiful color given the vaporousness of such a goal? Generic calls for lofty but distant and vague action, or generalized calls for more resources, may be all one can expect from certain quarters. Is it worth it to spend efforts bringing along people who have a strong

structural incentive to stay at the lowest common denominator? I have to wonder.

Grounds for hope

Now let me get to my reasons to be somewhat more optimistic than Girin.

Learning improves completion of primary and completion is an already-accepted goal

First, I'm optimistic because learning improvements—a right and end in themselves—are instrumentalist in terms of future incomes and social development. But they are even more instrumentalist in making more access, later in the grade structure, more likely and more affordable. Even the lowest-common-denominator countries and agencies, for instance, accept the need to improve completion rates. Well, it so happens that many countries that are favored by donors and have received money more or less as water from a fire-hose are at such low rates of completion efficiency that

it will be hard to expand access beyond primary at anything like a reasonable cost. And these are the countries doing worst on foundational learning.

Three cases in point make the stylized fact. The data in the figure below show for three more or less typical countries along a progression, two variables: learning levels in Grade 2 as proxied by the percentage of children who cannot read a single word, and the "efficiency of completion," namely the completion ratio divided by the gross enrollment ratio. This latter should ideally be 1. The data on this are not available for a lot of countries. And strict causality is hard to prove, but if I were a betting man, I would bet there is something real going on here. Malawi shows huge numbers of kids not reading (90 percent) and an abysmal completion efficiency of 30 percent or so. Tanzania, on the other extreme, has about 27 percent of kids not reading and a completion efficiency of 90 percent—almost the exact opposite. Uganda is in the middle. If these efficiencies are not improved, by getting the foundations right, then improving completion and throughput, in countries

Figure 4. Completion of primary and foundational learning
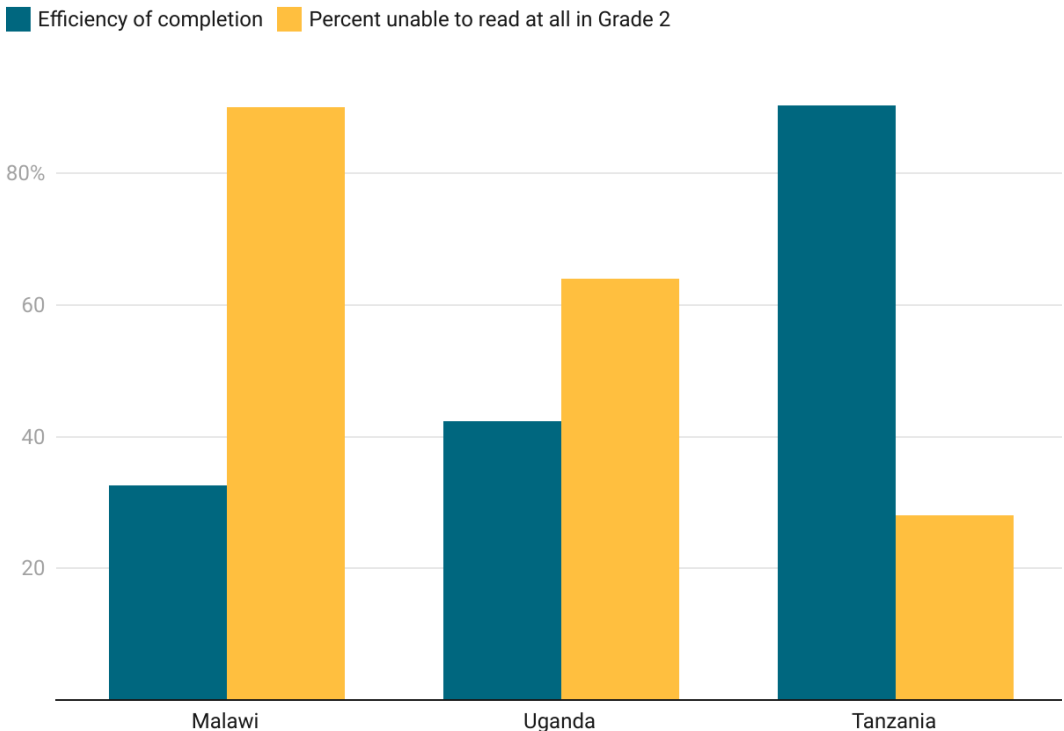
such as Uganda and Malawi, given those inefficiencies, will be extremely expensive.

Furthermore, at some point those in control not of education but of money in general are bound to ask themselves what is going on with the funding and trends in learning that countries produce in exchange for the funding. In six countries with some of the worst completion efficiency issues (Burundi, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mozambique, Uganda, and Malawi), the completion rate in the last five years or so has averaged 50 percent, and has been increasing at about 1.2 points per year: 25 more years to get to even 80 percent completion. *So, it is not just learning goals that some could consider abstract and long-term that are being stymied, but the very concrete ones of retention in school and school completion—and they are constrained **now***. Further, these are countries that have been highly favored by development partners, receiving upwards of US$6 billion, collectively, over the past 15-20 years (my estimate).

While we do not have strict causal evidence, we have a pretty good clue as to why all this happens. In household surveys, when parents are asked why their children do not finish primary school, the first answer is typically economics, but the second is typically some variant of "they are not learning much." This manifests through parents and teachers often making kids repeat Grades 1 and 2 even in systems where there is supposed automatic promotion. In Uganda, schools report about 10 percent repetition in Grade 1 to authorities but the parents and teachers of 40 percent of Grade 1 children see them as repeaters. And when asked why their kids repeat, the reason most often given by parents is that they are not learning enough. In many cases the repetition is somewhat definitional as Grade 1 is used in lieu of pre-primary—but in either case, children are unprepared to learn, do not learn, gum up the system, and years of their lives are devalued. Eventually—but only after trying a good bit—they drop out before completing. There were fears that countries and parents and teachers would, if faced with a social goal of improving primary school completion rates, start to "socially promote." But it may be that even in countries

that have reified promotion and made it automatic, in various ways teachers and parents go against it, and kids repeat, sometimes massively and without being reported as repeating (given a policy of automatic promotion), sometimes again and again, until they get tired and finish before completing and before learning all that much. (This is not to question automatic promotion. Repetition does not generally seem to increase achievement.)

In this sense, not minding foundational learning will tend to stymie even an expansion of access itself, by making it inefficient and expensive. One can perhaps be at least somewhat optimistic that the right authorities both in countries and internationally will come to understand this point. It seems too glaring to ignore, but perhaps I am being naïve.

Donor agencies do know the issue

The second reason to be a bit more optimistic is that I think most serious sectoral managers at a certain level that is quasi-political may want to be all things to all people, and prioritize all goals equally, but they know this is not possible. They may not admit it in public (because how often does one find a politician who can?) but they know it. And the evidence is piling up that foundational learning is the easiest entry point into improving all other things, for several reasons. It is still hard, as Girin says, but among all the hard things one could do to improve learning, foundational learning is the easiest.

Why is that? First, because it is where there is the clearest technical evidence about what methods to use, and which inputs are the most useful. There are always doubts and controversies, but the preponderance of the evidence now points to a few replicable ideas. Second, there are some success stories of organizing systems to improve foundational learning. Some of these cases are even exogenous to development agencies and international NGOs. Some have worked at scale, some have worked as large pilots. Third, because the lessons derived from improving foundational learning will

generalize *up to*, and apply to other subjects and later grades, more easily than improvement lessons from those later subjects and grades will generalize *down*. Finally, while there are powerful development partner coalitions in a few areas that are more about access than learning *stricto sensu*, such as girls' education, if there is one focus area of learning around which a coalition could be formed, it would be foundational learning in, presumably, reading and mathematics.

A hard but not impossible road ahead

One last reflection. I think one reason, even if not maybe the most powerful reason, why leaders in development agencies and in countries do not take on the learning task is that they see it as very difficult, either technically or politically/managerially. We in the

development agency community may have promoted that view to some degree. Even Girin's essay emphasizes this difficulty: "moving education outcomes is incredibly hard…," "improving the quality of basic education is very hard…," "betting any of the SDG 4 objectives accomplished will be extraordinarily difficult." The reasons for doing this are understandable. One would not want to enthuse countries and actors to embark on something that turns out to be very difficult just to meet with disappointment. On the other hand one does not want actors to be paralyzed by fear. Perhaps the points raised in the paragraph above are germane here. Yes, it is very hard to improve all learning outcomes in all grades, but starting with foundational learning is relatively easy (for the reasons noted above), though hard enough that one cannot be complacent. But there are agencies that are ready to help. They could get better organized, but there is readiness—at least in some.

Every Global Certainty Can Be Disproven by a Local Reality

Anton De Grauwe, Head of Technical Cooperation, UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning

Girin Beeharry's essay on the pathway to progress on Sustainable Development Goal 4 is thoughtful and thought provoking. But it left me somewhat uncomfortable. While I agree with much of it, I cannot fully share the belief in "performance monitoring" and "accountability" as the way forward. My discomfort has to do with how Girin's conclusions could be used, and misused, when the debate moves from the global to the national and the local levels. My reflections are less concerned than Girin's with the global aid architecture and more with in-country realities. There are three reasons for this.

First, my own experience, mainly at UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning. For some 10 years, I have led a team in charge of supporting countries with the preparation of education sector plans and related documents. My research has focused on school supervision, decentralization, and the functioning of the educational administration, three themes that are strongly influenced by national contexts. I still remember my first contact with the global aid community, 35 years ago, as a secondary school teacher in the Caribbean. Upon the advice of the World Bank, the ministry of education decided to lengthen the school day, a measure that to us teachers was in no way an answer to the profound daily problems we faced.

Second, I believe that the impact of the global education architecture on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) and similar goals is limited. Sustained change demands commitment and action by national and local actors.

Third and maybe most important, I fear that the proposals to improve the functioning of the global architecture will seep into and distort national discussions on educational improvement, where the challenges are very different. While performance measurement and accountability may be priorities for global organizations, they form a very incomplete part of what is needed at local level.

My reflections are based on my experience, or rather on my interpretation of my experience (therefore limited and biased); my reading of literature; and discussions with colleagues and friends, including Girin himself.

SDG 4 or FLN: Do we have to choose?

Let me start with what may appear, but should not be, controversial. Girin's essay argues that there is an almost unsolvable conflict between the imperative to respect the broad global mandate that SDG 4 represents, and the need to prioritize, because this mandate is impossible to realize. Girin's priority is FLN. But this argument is built on a misinterpretation (by some actors of the "global aid architecture") of SDG 4.

SDG 4 is not a global education plan, and it is even less a blueprint for a national education plan. There are

several reasons for this. SDG4 is not accompanied by a comprehensive set of strategies that can lead to its achievement, nor by a detailed estimate of total cost and available funding. Countries are simply too different for any single action agenda to be relevant. More importantly, insisting on the need to address all SDG 4 targets at the same time may lead to a status quo, for two reasons. First, countries will spread their scarce resources over the whole sector, with such little depth that it makes no difference. Second, as Girin notes, when a policy has to respond to the desiderata of all different interest groups, it risks responding mainly to those whose voice is loudest, whose power is strongest.

Denying that SDG 4 is a global plan, does not make this Goal less valuable, rather to the contrary. As a policy or a plan, SDG 4 can easily be put aside as unachievable, and therefore without credibility. The role of SDG 4 is different. It presents a long-term vision for the development of a learning system. As such, it is a source of inspiration that can bring people together and create "enthusiasm," a resource that is all too scarce among many stakeholders, who have lost belief in the possibility of improvement.

It is therefore eminently possible to ascribe to the long-term vision that SDG4 presents and to design policies and plans that have a much more selective set of priorities. I recognize, as someone who has worked with many ministries of education on their education plans, that when sector-wide plans fail to choose a select set of priorities, they can become an instrument for the status quo rather than a force for reform. That is, in aiming to change everything, often nothing changes.

The global aid architecture and the lack of change

Girin's essay goes a step further: it proposes a focus on one single priority, namely FLN, and sees this as a strategy to improve the functioning of the global aid architecture. He argues (i) that this focus allows for a clear priority, (ii) with an indicator that is both measurable and actionable, and (iii) for which aid agencies can be held accountable. On each of these three elements, I have several reflections.

A single priority that is not one

Girin presents several strong arguments for the selection of FLN as the priority for countries characterized by learning poverty. Although I agree with him, the strongest argument is also one that shows the near impossibility of selecting a single priority. This is the argument that a focus on FLN allows for the identification and examination of different system dysfunctions, which explain the low levels of learning. Indeed, "learning poverty" has many causes. They may include, without any order of priority: the scarcity and/or poor quality of early childhood education; the inappropriate classroom practices of early grade teachers; the incapacity of parents to demand better school performance; the unavailability of basic teaching and learning materials; the lack of awareness among teachers of where they need to improve; the ineffective school support and supervision structure; the unsatisfactory performance of teacher training institutions; and so on. In other words, choosing FLN as a policy priority allows for a sharper focus in a discussion on relevant strategies. However, the decision on which plan/program to adopt to achieve FLN still involves difficult choices between potentially conflicting strategies, and a discussion of the role of different sub-sectors. Such a plan/program may not be as wide as some sector plans, but it will always include a diverse set of strategies, aiming to effect different elements of the education system.

One issue that I am hesitant about is who decides that FLN will be the priority. Ideally, national authorities should do so. But Girin mentions several valid reasons why many do not. From my own experience working with ministers of education and their staff, this is not because they have an elitist vision from a privileged position, but because they have identified other challenges as more urgent: the almost total absence of technical and vocational education or the utterly ineffective governance of the system. Undoubtedly, that

choice is in part an expression of their own social position, but that does not render their choice valueless. What may be more surprising is that teachers and parents are not clamoring for a focus on FLN. I will come back to that in a moment. In such a context, can this priority be imposed by the international community? This may be the implication of Girin's suggestion that we should only work with countries already persuaded of the need to prioritize FLN. This is evidently not a preferred scenario, not so much because of an uncritical respect for "national sovereignty," but because an imposed priority is hardly a genuine one, and may be respected in appearance but not in action. Ideally, the choice of priorities will result from a search in which all stakeholders participate, guided by "evidence" on successful programs, by the experiences of the different actors (which is also evidence), by their opinions, and their interests. The international community, as one of these stakeholders, can bring convincing arguments and build a coalition in support of FLN.

A frightening indicator we can afford to disregard

One apparently strong argument for the focus on FLN is the very low levels of learning, illustrated by several references to the learning poverty indicator. The existence of a single indicator that allows for easy measurement of its achievement is seen as an advantage. I cannot fully agree. There are two major risks with an emphasis on this one indicator.

First, when it is easier to manipulate an indicator than to change the behavior this indicator intends to measure, there will be a strong temptation towards manipulation. This is not unique to education nor is it prevalent only in developing countries. The phenomenon is so well known that it has its own law, Campbell's Law, which states: "The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor." Diane Ravitch's excellent

book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* presents schools' gaming of the tests as an almost unavoidable response to "test-limited" management and refers to multiple reports of systematic cheating on tests in school. It is not ill-mannered to suggest that schools and teachers in education systems, where regulation is weak and such test results are high stakes, will be tempted to change results; this would actually be the intelligent reaction. It can be argued that externally administered standardized tests are difficult to manipulate. This may be true, but it emphasizes an essential worry: these tests are not integrated into the evaluation practices of the education system. As a result, they are low stakes. They lead to neither rewards nor sanctions for schools, teachers, or students; they provoke no action on their behalf. This helps explain why many teachers and parents do not consider FLN as a priority. They are simply not aware of the severity of the learning crisis. It is too easy to say that exams cannot be trusted and therefore should be disregarded when every administration spends significant efforts to run them and when they remain the main tool for social mobility. It is politically, technically, and institutionally much simpler to organize an external assessment than to reform the exam system, but the latter is more important. Now (with some simplification), several countries are faced with a conundrum: exams are high stakes and actionable, but distrusted by much of the international community; external achievement tests are trusted, but considered of little importance by those who need to change their practice or whose voices need to be strengthened.

The second risk is that an indicator of FLN offers a very simplified picture of a very diverse and complex situation. The simplification is threefold:

- There are many different factors that help explain if children have learned or not. FLN is the result of these factors. Learning improvement demands that these factors undergo change. An FLN indicator does not inform us at all about these factors.
- The distinction between a child who is foundationally literate and numerate and one who is not is not

clear-cut. Comparison with equivalent health-related indicators (neo-natal, infant, and under-5 mortality) is instructive: mortality sadly bears no discussion. The statement that "nearly 9 of 10 children aged 10 in sub-Saharan Africa are not able to read with comprehension" reflects a number of choices made by those who measure, and does not tell us anything about the level of learning of the 90 percent. This is not to argue that we are not faced with a serious crisis, but that the depth and extent of this crisis (and the brightness of the rays of hope…) are important elements in a policy debate.

- The third point is the most important for me. The FLN indicator presents an average, but in reality, this average does not exist. Each school is different and unique. Of course, no national indicator can represent this diversity, but this is particularly problematic in efforts to improve learning. Test results inform us about the state of the system, but change in learning depends more on what happens in the school and in the classroom than through a system-wide reform, especially in countries where such systematic efforts do not reach all schools and classrooms. The implication is that each school needs support to design its own improvement strategy, based on its present situation. An FLN indicator, even more so if it is based on a sample survey, usefully guides system reform, but does not provide the essential school-relevant knowledge.

While an FLN indicator is concrete and measurable enough to highlight if action is needed, it is not helpful to define which actions are needed where. I have little doubt that Girin is aware of the limits of the FLN indicator, but my worry remains that, with so much attention and energy going to this one indicator, less energy (and funding) is available for a more comprehensive indicator system.

Let me add here that we should be careful in transplanting experiences from a country that has improved FLN to other countries. Undoubtedly, such experiences are sources of inspiration. However, in many cases this success is not the result of a set of strategies that can become a universal reform package, but rather of the relevance of these strategies to a specific context. It is not the strategy but its appropriateness to the context that makes for success.

The question of accountability: A different tragedy of the commons?

The question of the accountability, or lack of it, of the international community is a pertinent one. Two principles and one more practical question should guide any discussion on accountability. The first principle: there should be a balance between professionalism, autonomy, and accountability. A genuine professional deserves autonomy, and this autonomy should be accompanied by accountability. The second principle: I can only be held accountable for something over which I have control. The practical question: to whom am I accountable? Who can hold me accountable?

The first principle poses no problems for the global education community: most of us are genuine professionals, with the qualifications, competencies, specialized knowledge, resources, and sense of service that allow us to make a difference. Most of us work with significant autonomy. Therefore, we can and should be held accountable, as individuals and as agencies. The second principle is more complicated. The global community does not have control over the achievement of FLN. Undoubtedly, it influences this in different ways, through funding, advice, and technical support. However, FLN is the result of actions by many different groups, some with more direct influence than the global community. In such a scenario, where several groups need to contribute to achieve a single result, it is easy to escape accountability as others can almost always be blamed (usually, blame is shared).

This raises, of course, the question: for what can the global education community and its members be held accountable, in our joint effort to achieve FLN? I would suggest, as a minimum, two elements. First, the choice of strategies and programs that we promote, or fund,

or implement. We can be asked to demonstrate that this choice is made through careful and well-argued reflection, which refers to relevant evidence, on how these strategies and programs contribute to achieving FLN. This is fully under our control. Second, the success of these strategies and programs, namely: how far have their intended objectives (at least at the "outcome," not only at the "output" level) been achieved? We should be fully transparent in the methodological aspects of the evaluation, in its findings, and in how we intend to change our practice in function of these findings. While we do not always fully control the outcomes of a program, we cannot judge a program only by its intentions; we need to look at their actual effects.

Who can demand such accountability? Girin suggests that we hold ourselves accountable. I am not fully convinced, but I do not have a better alternative to propose. I am not convinced because even a humble individual finds it difficult to examine her or his own performance and accept responsibility for mistakes. Organizations, who are working in a competitive environment, and are staffed by strong-minded experts, may be less prone to do so. (I do recognize that there are exceptions, with effective evaluation or oversight services in several organizations, but I have not seen many examples of their reports leading to profound changes in practice.) In an ideal world, the demand for accountability would come from those who are the beneficiaries of the FLN-focused programs, students and their families. But that ideal world is far away. So, in the meantime, the answer is probably a combination of different approaches: to reinforce internal accountability mechanisms; to strengthen the existing global fora that aim to hold the international community accountable; and to continue the long and slow struggle of strengthening the voice of the unheard.

The weakness of accountability is unfortunate, especially because it limits the opportunities for learning by the global community from mistakes and successes, but I do not want to dramatize this. The existence of an accountability system is not the only incentive to undertake work of good quality that benefits students and their societies. There are other incentives that guide us. Some are institutional, such as professional development or the promotion of a culture of joint learning, while others are individual, including a sense of duty and a sense of service.

The global architecture and the local reality

I finish my reflections with four points that I rather think Girin will agree with. They are not contradictory to what he wrote, and they are in part inspired by discussions with him.

FLN is a useful and a legitimate priority for many countries. However, the choice of FLN as a priority does not imply that the problem of ambitious plans and competing priorities is solved. There will always be a need for an internal policy dialogue on the choice of appropriate strategies, on the funding of competing programs. This is potentially very useful. An "outcome harvesting" evaluation of IIEP's support to Jordan and Guinea with the preparation of their sector plans demonstrates that this internal process, with government leadership and in a participatory spirit, is not only well appreciated but has also led to some significant changes, including more robust government funding and better coordination between ministries.

"Performance measurement and monitoring" are essential to management, to learning, and to improvement. But the emphasis needs to shift in two ways.

· Deepen ownership and awareness of relevant measurements, not so much among the global community, but at national and local levels, where change in action is most necessary. I would be very surprised if many Malian teachers actually realize that their teaching is so weak that only 2 percent of early learners master FLN. And when they are confronted with this datum, their understandable reaction may be one of disbelief. Too many other signals (the performance of other teachers; the acceptance by many parents; their continued employment; pass rates and exam results) paint a less dark (though not

necessarily a rosy) picture. And if ever they recognize their weakness, many are at a loss to know how to improve, which brings me to my second shift.

· Move the balance of our efforts and our funding from "measurement" to "learning for improved action." Develop system-wide responses that support local actors and allow appropriate local leeway (more framing when local capacities are weak; more autonomy when they are strong). Support the search by districts and by schools for a reform package that is appropriate to their situation. Listen to global advice; learn from experiences elsewhere; but keep in mind that every global certainty can be disproven by a local reality.

Balance accountability with support. The above principles about accountability play out very differently at the district and school levels, where, with a crude simplification, the situation can be summarized as "little professionalism, little autonomy, little accountability." Strengthening only one of these elements makes things worse, especially if that one element is "accountability" or "autonomy."

Finally, the fact that many education staff and many teachers have lost belief that they can make a difference is arguably the deepest challenge to be solved. Without disregarding the severity of the learning crisis, we need to find sources of optimism. We have to think of the teachers who, against the odds and abandoned by the system, continue to go to school and work hard for their students. We have to support those ministry officials who, almost on their own in an often sclerotic and demotivating environment, work beyond the call of duty for a better future for their country. Indicators do not capture the full reality, and we have to believe that there is still enough energy, willpower, and determination to make for lasting change.

Achieving SDG 4 Requires Prioritising Foundational Learning, Globally and Nationally

Ashish Dhawan, Founder and Chairman, Central Square Foundation

As a Gates Foundation partner committed to improving foundational literacy and numeracy in India, it is not remarkable that I found myself in agreement with Girin Beeharry's call to the global aid architecture to prioritise foundational learning if we are to progress on SDG 4 targets. His logic is straightforward: children must learn to walk before they can run, and they cannot learn more skills without having foundational ones to build off of. To this I would only add that the same logic holds true for systems, and this strengthens his argument further; systems that cannot solve basic yet fundamental problems will struggle as we load them with wider and more complex priorities, and indeed, are likely to get locked into a cycle of underperformance.[1] More funding and more priorities for systems that cannot deliver is not the answer. We must be laser sharp in prioritising the foundations, build demonstrated capacity to solve for outcomes, and then extend.

What are the issues at the national level?

What I did find remarkable was how closely the problem areas that Girin calls out in the global architecture mirror those at the national and local level. Prioritisation, performance monitoring, and accountability are exactly the key interlinked and deep-rooted constraints that affect the ability of the Indian education system to equip most of its children with foundational skills by grade 3. As papers by Lant Pritchett[2] and Stuti Khemani,[3] and Girin's essay, suggest, the low visibility of primary learning outcomes is key to why politicians and bureaucrats do not focus on them but focus instead on more tangible and easily moved indicators. It is why every village in India has a primary school with a teacher or two within a kilometer or two, with no regard for the (mostly deleterious) impact such an infrastructural setup has on actual learning.[4] Another recent case in point is the treatment of higher grades when it comes to COVID response. India's institutions—government, courts, and media—were all focused on what happens to higher grades which have school leaving "board" exams. School reopening plans consistently prioritised those grades, with next to no attention to the fact that primary grades were shut for the entire year, and scheduled to remain as such in the coming months. While sterling efforts by ASER over the past decade and a half have put primary school

1. Andrews, M., Woolcock, M., & Pritchett, L. (2017). Building state capability: Evidence, analysis, action (p. 288). Oxford University Press.
2. Pritchett, L. (2015). Creating education systems coherent for learning outcomes: Making the transition from schooling to learning. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE).
3. Khemani, S. (2019). What Is State Capacity?. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, (8734)
4. Largely because of how badly it stretches the feasible human resource envelope for both teaching and governance. The average pupil-teacher ratio in government schools in India is already better than the policy norm, yet the average hides the fact that in approximately 60 percent of classrooms, one teacher is teaching multiple grades. The governance problem is even worse—since most schools are small and geographically widespread, school leadership and government monitoring is relatively much weaker.

outcomes on the civil society and research map, these are still not electorally relevant because they are still invisible to the vast majority.

Performance monitoring naturally follows prioritisation, and, predictably, information systems are geared towards measuring inputs. Annual reporting exists at the national level on measures of school buildings, toilets, teachers, and students. The National Achievement Survey, a sample survey intended to highlight outcomes, is conducted only once every three years, and on the three occasions it has been held, has not been comparable over time, with difficult-to-parse results that independent observers do not consider reliable.[5] At the state level too, the story of what gets monitored is similar with some variance, and even where learning is monitored, most state officials and teachers will freely admit in private that the data is heavily inflated, and of course, there are independent measurements to that effect.[6] To some extent, the paucity and poor quality of data feeds back into the issue of prioritisation, allowing many politicians and bureaucrats to simply deny that there is a problem that needs to be solved at all.

Accountability is perhaps the most broken of these areas, even on the much more limited definition offered by Girin in his essay: "to take periodic stock of progress, to reflect on the reasons why we are or aren't making any, and to alter the course of our action as required." This too is closely linked to the other issues of prioritisation and performance monitoring. If politicians face no electoral pressure on learning goals, and have no good measures for them, who will take stock of what and why?

What are we doing?

The Central Square Foundation's (CSF) strategy has been to build salience for foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) among policymakers, demonstrate success at scale in a few states, and create public goods through our work in these demonstrations. This is in addition to our work on improving learning outcomes in private schools and via education technology, which are also focused on FLN improvement, but which I will not elaborate on here. Thanks to the efforts of several organisations and experts, both global and local, the first strategy (salience building) has had relatively more success, more quickly than we had anticipated. FLN featured prominently in Indian's National Education Policy, and the government of India has recently announced the FLN mission, which aims to universalise FLN by 2025 and provides us a unique opportunity, though the official launch has been delayed by the COVID outbreak.

A major part of our work for the short/medium term has thus become working directly with education departments at the state and national level to try and make the FLN mission a success. We are supporting governments in program design and rollout in the now expanded number of states we work with (currently 8 of the 16 large Indian states). Much of our work in these states will center around ways to improve performance monitoring and (limited) accountability structures which are tightly coupled with the technical aspects of improving classroom practice, which we are also working on (i.e., developing teaching and learning material based on a structured pedagogy approach, and teacher professional development and coaching aligned to the material and approach).

In the longer term, making universal learning at the primary level a political priority appears to be one of the, if not the, most critical levers for sustainable improvement.[7] It is also an incredibly difficult change to achieve and will require large cultural shifts. One plausible medium-term pathway we are exploring is building a credible and easily observed metric as well as salience for it amongst the electorate. India's recent National Education Policy offers an opportunity to do this via the stated goal of having key stage assessments at grades 3,5, and 8. The challenge will be to create an institutional setup that keeps measuring outlined

5. Johnson, Doug and Andrés Parrado. 2020. "Assessing the Assessments: Taking Stock of Learning Outcomes Data in India", ISE 2020 Online Presentation Series. Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE)
6. Singh, A. (2020). Myths of Official Measurement: Auditing and Improving Administrative Data in Developing Countries. RISE Working Paper 20/042.
7. Khemani, S. (2019). What Is State Capacity?. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, (8734)

competencies with validity and reliability over time while also making the results of these examinations salient for the school system (public and private), students, and parents.[8] We are thus supporting some state and national-level governments and examination boards in trying to arrive at a model for getting key stage assessments rolled out and getting them right as a demonstration, and on codifying lessons from these for other states and boards.

How can the global community help?

I will once again echo Girin's call for more prioritisation around FLN. While politicians focus primarily on the local electorate, clear and focused international mandates can also be useful motivators for governments. This is even more important for the bureaucratic and technical communities, which often look to international counterparts for professional norms. As Girin points out, the sharp focus on very specific and basic metrics like infant and maternal mortality in the MDGs went a long way in coalescing national efforts in health systems, and this success is ripe for replication in education.

I cannot stress enough the need for robust data to support performance monitoring and accountability, and I offer my view on what is needed. While truly independent data can be accurate, it is also often treated within government as not being legitimate; for example, poor performance on both ASER and PISA is typically dismissed defensively by the government (see for e.g Kumar, 2019; Vishnoi, 2012).[9] The pressure to show good results on the other hand, skews education department data to the point where it is simply not useful. What we need is a compact via which

governments can introduce data reliability processes with independent checks that allow them to measure and improve the quality of their data and be celebrated for honest (albeit low in levels) outcome reporting by both international and local constituencies. This is something that the global architecture can help with, by prioritising the introduction of independent checks to help improve data, as well as prioritising generation of high-quality data as an indicator.

Girin also calls for active funding for research-and-evaluation-type public goods, giving the example of the Tusome evaluation, and proposes that public goods tend to not get used in part because they do not answer the questions that policymakers are asking. Here I will differ from him not in the call to action, but in the implication of the earlier diagnosis. Policymakers, at least in the Indian context, and at least in my experience, are typically not asking questions that sustain long enough to be answered by research, especially in the absence of appropriate prioritisation, which is the context we face in education. I do not see that changing in the near future. The research agenda will thus have to be determined via some combination of interaction with advocacy priorities and gaps in the literature. Ideally, inputs from policymakers who are known consumers of research and engage with it deeply would also help shape the agenda.

While it may be possible that Girin and I agree because we are partners in co-funding CSF, I am more partial to the view that we are partners because the evidence independently leads us to agree on what we believe is an inescapable conclusion: that achieving broad-based FLN in developing countries is a critical and urgent first step to bettering the human condition via education. This is why at CSF our "North Star" is to halve learning poverty in India by 2030.

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8. While such an enterprise also suffers from the same issues, at least in some respects it is a more 'logistical' task, one that can be relatively simpler for governments with weak state capacity to implement (Andrews et al., 2017)

9. Kumar, K. (2019). Why education doesn't become a poll issue. Indian Express; Vishnoi. A (2012). Poor PISA score: Govt blames 'disconnect' with India. Indian Express

The Three-Legged Stool Approach to Advancing Basic Learning in East Africa

Youdi Schipper, Risha Chande and Aidan Eyakuze, Twaweza East Africa

In his essay "The Pathway to Progress on SDG 4" Girin Beeharry calls for leadership in the education aid architecture, focusing attention mainly on multilateral funding agencies and bilateral donors.

He argues for a focus on three main things. First, define clear priorities: if you try to do everything, you end up doing nothing. The policy priority he advocates for is foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN). His priority targets are low-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Second, he calls for monitoring progress towards those priorities. It is lamentable that basic questions about learning progress towards SDG 4 cannot be answered, because the data needed to make meaningful FLN comparisons over time and between countries are missing, not least for sub-Saharan Africa.

Third, he calls on the education aid architecture to use monitoring to create accountability for progress (or lack of it), and to press for change.

Girin closes his essay by inviting civil society and non-governmental organisations "to use their powerful voices to not only advocate for more spending on education, but to hold countries and the global aid architecture accountable for the collective promises made over the years to improve learning outcomes, starting with FLN." As a civil society organisation (CSO) working on measurement, monitoring, and accountability in FLN in East Africa since 2009 we at Twaweza are grateful for the opportunity to add our voice, forged from experiment and experience, to Girin's call.

We agree with the basic leadership profile Girin outlines and his call for prioritizing FLN. His three-legged stool of setting priorities, measuring progress, and instituting accountability or consequences for measured progress is not rocket science, but it is backed by research in the economics of management (Bloom and Van Reenen, 2007; Bloom and co-authors, 2014). So there is no reason for this not to work in the architecture of education aid as well.

Importantly, recent evidence suggests that the target-measure-accountability sequence also matters when managing school systems and for improving learning outcomes (World Development Report 2018). We will illustrate elements in this sequence with some examples from our education programs in Tanzania and discuss this in relation to points made in the essay, particularly on the role of CSOs vis-à-vis government.

First leg: Setting targets

The first concrete leg advocated by Girin, prioritising FLN in sub-Saharan Africa, in many ways aligns with the work of Twaweza East Africa. We work in Tanzania,

Kenya, and Uganda, and within our education-related work, we have always focused on basic skills or FLN. As Girin points out, without FLN progress it is hard to imagine widespread student progress at later stages in their school career.

As in many contexts, in East Africa there are a myriad of political disincentives to prioritizing FLN. Early grade learning is not politically salient compared to more sensitive markers such as primary school leaving examinations. Early grade pupil-teacher ratios are high, and student attrition is intense. A majority of early grade teachers are absent from class, and, when asked, say they would prefer to teach in the upper grades.

Combined with high population growth rates, the early grade learning environment seems destined to deteriorate even further. The continued neglect and illiteracy risk of large numbers of early grade students reflects an apparent political priority.

Second leg: Monitoring

Part of the problem is the relative invisibility of the conditions and outcomes in the early grades in East Africa. This brings us to the second leg: monitoring. We are missing a salient learning performance metric at Grade 2 or 3 level (ages 9-10), one that can become a recognised lodestar for the FLN policy agenda across the region. This is not a new idea: Girin tells policymakers: "[If] you don't have a learning assessment, make sure you introduce one and ask for support from the development partners." Bruns and Makyal wrote in 2019: "It is time—indeed, past time—to support a regionwide test that serves all countries in sub-Saharan Africa." Regionwide tests also have the potential to create more political salience through cross-border comparisons.

Twaweza has long supported independent monitoring of FLN outcomes in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. Our Uwezo[1] (*capability*) program focuses on measuring progress towards basic skills (FLN) targets, using simple but sound data collection tools, inspired by ASER/Pratham

in India. The data also features other relevant variables, including teacher attendance. We communicate the results to parents and various layers in the education system to create awareness and accountability. According to Uwezo (2019), in Tanzania the percentage of children aged 9-13, both in and out of school, mastering full Grade 2 FLN skills was 42 percent in 2011 and 45 percent in 2017.

When the results of the first Uwezo assessments were made public, there was a strong official backlash. Depending on the country, the official stance has varied between recognition of the results and refusal to provide field permits. We are convinced that the emerging national and international consensus around the importance of FLN outcomes—relative to school inputs—has been facilitated by the evidence on the scant improvement in learning outcomes made public by organisations such as Pratham and Uwezo (see https://palnetwork.org). But this evidence has yet to take root in the collective mind of the education establishment in the region. For example, a study conducted by Twaweza (Lipovsek and Mkumbo, 2016) found that district officials working on education largely assess the quality of education through pass marks in national examinations and pupil progression to secondary school rather than mastery of skills.

Moreover, teachers appear to have a skewed perception of their students' capacity. In a recent nationally representative school survey in Tanzania, lower primary teachers were asked "What is the approximate share of pupils in your class that can read Kiswahili at Grade 2 level (for example a short story of five sentences); and answer comprehension questions?" An independent assessment showed that only 27 percent of their students in Grades 2 and 3 could both read a short Kiswahili paragraph and answer comprehension questions. The same question was asked for Grade 2 level addition, with similar results (see Figure 5). For both of these core skills, teachers estimated that about 7 out of 10 students had mastered the skill, but in fact only 3 had.

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1. Uwezo was previously a program of Twaweza but has now been spun off into three independent institutions in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda

Figure 5.

Student academic performance
Test results versus teacher estimates
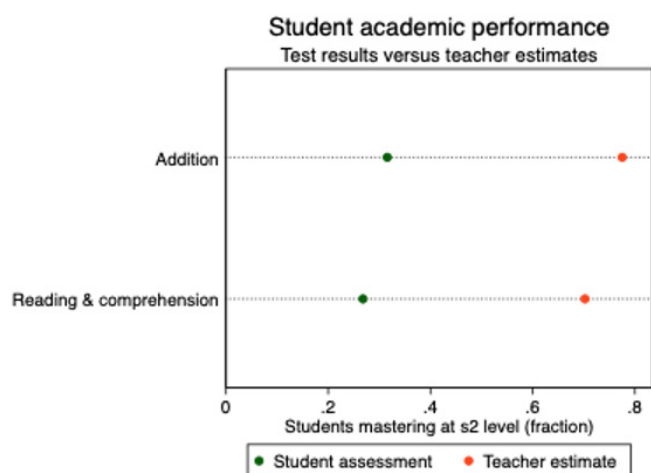
Source: Schipper et al.

This mismatch may stem from two issues. Teachers either know the real situation but, when asked by an outsider (an enumerator conducting a survey), exaggerate their students' performance. Or, teachers really do not have a good understanding of their students' performance. Most likely, it is a combination of reticence, wishful thinking, and lack of tracking student results. But because foundational learning is such a fundamental outcome, conversations with teachers should not reveal such a mismatch.

Third leg: Accountability

Progress on the FLN agenda will be enhanced if national-level authorities support and accept results from serious learning assessments, rather than push back. But even if national authorities accept these findings, convincing the many thousands of teachers and parents across the education system to view the distance between measurements and targets as their day-to-day responsibility is a huge task. This brings us to accountability and organizing "follow-up" consequences to performance metrics.

The Uwezo assessments include both a data collection and a dissemination component. At the macro level, this created a platform to discuss FLN challenges, but

at the household and community level, the information did not lead to personal or collective action (Lieberman et al., 2014; for a similar finding in India, see Banerjee et al., 2010).

Twaweza followed an alternative approach through a teacher performance pay program named KiuFunza (shorthand for "Kiu ya Kujifunza" or *Thirst to Learn*) in public primary schools in Tanzania. KiuFunza has been developed and implemented by Twaweza and subnational CSO partners, in collaboration with government and international research partners. The program targets only teachers in Grades 1-3 and is linked to independent measures of FLN: that is, Kiswahili reading and basic numeracy skills. The teacher bonuses paid average 3.5 percent of mean annual teacher salaries. There is no teacher training.

Overall, impact findings for 2013-14 and 2015-16 show that the KiuFunza performance rewards resulted in significant improvements in FLN outcomes for students in treatment schools, at current levels of teacher professional development. The most promising incentive model added three to four months of learning at less than half a month of teacher salary in bonus pay.

Based on the 2015-16 impact results, Tanzania's Ministry for Regional Administration and Local Government asked Twaweza to formulate and test a performance pay program that can be implemented at scale. In the current implementation model, teachers are paid for every skill that a student masters, even if they do not master all the curriculum skills. At the request of our government partners, we included a school-level bonus that is linked to FLN performance and can be used to finance infrastructure improvements.

Teacher performance pay is a micro-level version of the leadership-accountability framework Girin outlines. In KiuFunza, the targets are the various curriculum skills that together represent FLN mastery, and these are clearly set out at the start of the school year. Examples are reading syllables, words, and sentences; recognizing numbers; adding up; and subtracting. The program creates tangible consequences for teachers,

differentiated at the individual level, related to FLN achievement by students.

What does all this mean for the education aid architecture?

First, bilateral and multilateral donors should support FLN assessments, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. These data will be especially useful under a number of conditions: if testing methodologies and test items are comparable across countries, if many African countries participate, and if national education authorities are on board. There is an impressive amount of relevant assessment expertise in Africa, and there are large numbers of qualified testing personnel. A concrete step is for funders and donor agencies to convene relevant government officials to agree on a consistent assessment methodology and to support data collection over the long term. The data from such assessments are a necessary diagnostic instrument to support FLN progress and, subsequently, reforms to speed up FLN.

For example, the student assessment evidence provided by Twaweza and others helped to generate a number of reforms and policies. In Tanzania, the most visible reforms were Big Results Now! and its successor, Education Program for Results (EP4R). Not surprisingly, both these programs have a strong results orientation, with clearly defined goals and metrics, including learning outcomes. In EP4R, education aid disbursements are linked to progress against pre-agreed targets.

Second, test-based accountability programs in the early grades, including performance pay, deserve serious attention in education systems with weak oversight and governance. Primary school teachers in East Africa have very few one-on-one meetings with their head teacher, and they are largely left to manage themselves after their initial training. Accountability for primary schools takes the form of leaving examinations administered years after FLN should have been taught.

Teacher performance pay systems have been shown to improve student learning, particularly in low-income settings, but they are also hard for governments to implement, especially in weak education systems. A relevant question is whether public education systems can successfully outsource elements of workforce management systems to private organisations. An example of comprehensive outsourcing in Liberia is studied by Romero and co-authors (2020), where management in treatment schools was fully delegated to private providers.

Outsourcing a teacher performance pay system is a less radical management innovation, and there are a number of arguments supporting this idea. There are very few performance pay systems that operate at scale, and when they do, the implementation work (testing, payments) is typically outsourced to a dedicated technical agency or management unit. Second, performance management systems require trust in the fidelity of the metrics and promises on all sides. In our experience, a non-state actor can provide such trust. Third, many observers agree that low-performing education systems require "disruptive innovation" to improve. At the same time, there is evidence that successful at-scale reforms require the creation of new program-specific implementation capacity (Muralidharan and Singh, 2020).

A specific argument for performance pay in the context of the aid architecture is its "leverage." As Girin notes, the scale of aid resources is small relative to national budgets. But many performance pay programs feature incentives that are small (3-5 percent) relative to the annual salaries that make up the lion's share of most national budgets. As mentioned earlier, performance pay has the potential to generate disproportional learning effects relative to the budget.

Third, accountability and governance reform in education are only part of the FLN puzzle. Twaweza focused on FLN accountability for a few reasons: training programs did not seem very effective at the time; there was promising evidence on performance incentives; and few others were interested in actively exploring incentives in an experimental setting. However, pedagogy reform, if done well, can deliver improvements in

learning that are on average larger than accountability reforms (Crouch and DeStefano, 2015). Complementarities between pedagogy reforms and teacher incentives could be a promising area for future research.

Finally, Girin remarks in his essay that there is a "yawning gap between the knowledge that has been produced and what donors and countries choose to do." If this is true, some form of scientific accountability should become part of the aid architecture. This could take the shape of testable hypotheses at the start of a new program, with high-quality research designs to ensure that the questions can indeed be answered.

At Twaweza, we have always been interested in asking ourselves what works and what doesn't in improving learning, both through research and implementation experience. The good news for FLN is that we know how to measure it. There is also growing evidence on what works and does not work to improve FLN in weak education systems. The education aid architecture today is in a unique, evidence-rich position. The way forward is through a tight focus on FLN targets and assessments, using results from high-quality research and learning from well-implemented innovations.

The Ground Beneath Our Feet

Hugh McLean, Senior Advisor, Education Program, Open Society Foundations (writing in his personal capacity)

"'The only people who see the whole picture,' he murmured, 'are the ones who step out of the frame.'"
— Salman Rushdie, The Ground Beneath Her Feet

Girindre Beeharry's eloquent article in the International Journal of Education Development[1] and his FreshEd podcast[2] with Will Brehm, provide ardent reflections on the crucial importance of foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN). He offers a reasoned and compelling challenge for the "global education architecture" to prioritize these outcomes more urgently, particularly in lower-income countries (LICS) and especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

I agree that education systems should provide minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics by the end of primary school as SDG indicator 4.1.1(b) states.[3] Education systems significantly compromise the right to education if they cannot deliver this. But I do not agree that foundational learning means only literacy and numeracy; nor that prioritizing, in any sense of "narrowing the entire SDG 4 agenda to part of one indicator for one part of SDG 4.1,"[4] is the best way to improve foundational learning or, for that matter, outcomes in literacy and numeracy. As the saying goes, it takes a whole village to raise child: it will take the whole of SDG 4 to raise foundational learning.

To support my argument and offer a wider reflection on foundational learning and on the global education governance mechanisms that support its delivery, I adapt Catherine Emmott's idea of contextual frames in narrative text.[5] In fiction, a contextual frame is the mental conception readers form in reading a text or watching a movie; it involves time, story line, place, and characters. Switches to the contextual frame—such as flashbacks, the story from the viewpoint of another character, a story within a story, another story line—add bits of information we need to appreciate and understand the overall narrative.

Girin's contextual frame for his narrative on prioritising FLN reveals a global education community that comprises diverse actors: donor countries, international institutions, civil society organizations and structures, and national government partners. In a form of a collective *échec scolaire*, these actors have been unable to end illiteracy and innumeracy in the three decades since the 1990 Jomtien Declaration of Education for All. Their task, in this historic moment,

1. Girindre Beeharry (2021) The pathway to progress on SDG 4 requires the global education architecture to focus on foundational learning and to hold ourselves accountable for achieving it. IJED Volume 82, April 2021, 102375 https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0738059321000286
2. Girindre Beeharry (2021) Learning from the Failure to Improve Literacy Worldwide, FreshEd Podcast https://freshedpodcast.com/beeharry/
3. Scott Murray (2017) Functional literacy and numeracy: Definitions and options for measurement for the SDG Target 4.6 UNESCO, UIS, GAML. Retrieved April 4, 2021, http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/gaml4-functional-literacy-numeracy.pdf
4. SDG Target 4.1: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. SDG Indicator 4.1.1: Proportion of children and young people: (a) in grades 2/3; (b) at the end of primary; and (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex
5. Emmott, C. (1997) Narrative Comprehension: a Discourse Perspective. Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press.

is to prioritize FNL clearly among the more-expansive set of commitments that comprise SDG 4, rigorously monitor performance towards achieving FLN by the end of primary school, and shoulder accountability for doing so, particularly with regard to LICS and especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

This essay explores four frame switches to this narrative, each positioned from a different perspective. The first frame switch locates prioritising FLN historically within the 200-year period that early and late modern states took to achieve literate populations and build mass education systems. The second positions prioritising FLN inter-generationally to consider adult literacy and learning as outlined in SDG 4.6. The third frame switch places prioritising FLN within the reality of a normal school day and asks what it means for how schools think and what they do. The fourth relocates prioritising FLN within the evolving topography of global education governance,[6] effecting an exploration of the geopolitics of where agendas are set and how decisions are made.

The loss of inheritance: A short and incomplete history of tall achievements

"The present changes the past. Looking back you do not find what you left behind."
—*Kiran Desai, The Inheritance of Loss*

The past may also change the present; looking forward again, we may not find what we thought was here. In narrative theory, analepsis is when a past event is narrated at a point later than its chronological place in the story. This frame switch locates prioritising FLN within a lay history of mass literacy campaigns in the 200 years prior to Jomtien; it becomes a story about the development of the modern nation state and the end of colonial rule in the embers of the Second World War.

The history of mass literacy in Europe from the early 1800s[7] suggests a mutual dependency with the development of the modern state. Mass literacy took at least a century to achieve in Western countries; it made huge demands on resources with spending on education, at times, second only to spending on the military. It required huge effort to convince people of its benefits and the growth of the "reading public" tended to precede, rather than follow, the history of formal schooling.[8] The relationship between literacy and economic growth was complex; there appears to be no single narrative of literacy and economic development across Europe.

Twentieth century campaigns achieved mass literacy in far shorter periods—most began as integral parts of revolutionary movements[9] and were then continued by states that described themselves as socialist: China, Cuba, Russia, Tanzania, and Vietnam.[10] South Korea and Taiwan are exceptions although the long march to literacy in neighbouring China had a necessitating effect.

China's struggle to achieve mass literacy[11] took 70 years: it involved a series of intense campaigns over a huge geography and more than a billion people. Its early animators included populist educators like James Yen and Dewey student Tao Xingzhi—a young Mao Zedong taught in their campaigns. The literacy rate in Imperial China at the times of the reforms of 1905 and the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912 was probably 10-15

6. Steve Carney & Eleftherios Klerides (2020) Governance and the Evolving Global Education Order. Retrieved April 20, 2021, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10564934.2020.1769308
7. David Vincent (2000) The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe. Cambridge: Polity Press.
8. Martyn Lyons (1995) New Readers in the Nineteenth Century: Women, Children, Workers. Chapter in *Histoire de la lecture dans le monde occidental*. Eds. Gugliermo Cavallo & Roger Chartier. Published (1999) by the University of Massachusetts Press, Box 429, Amherst, MA 01004. Pg. 314.
9. Harmans Bhola (1984) Campaigning for literacy Eight national experiences of the twentieth century, with a memorandum to decision-makers. UNESCO. Retrieved April 1, 2021, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000062893
10. Sauder, Ruth (1982) Comparison of Literacy Campaigns in Socialistic and Democratic Countries. ERIC https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED230913
11. Charles Hayford (1987) Literacy Movements in Modern China from: Harvey Graff and Robert Arnove, ed., (New York; London: Plenum Press, 1987). Retrieved April 5, 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/300450509_Literacy_Movements_in_Modern_China/link/570bcb8308aee0660351a17d/download

percent. The communist movement inspired a vast range of informal village-level literacy and basic education initiatives, which the state took forward after the revolution in 1949. The 1982 census, China's first since 1954, put the literate population at 65.5 percent. Spurred on by Chairman Deng's economic reforms, literacy rates grew from 65.5 percent in 1982 to 96.8 percent in 2018, an average annual rate of 10.52 percent—roughly on par with China's economic growth over the same period.

Cuba's national literacy campaign of 1961—Yo si Puedo (Yes I Can)—was a huge success. In 1961, the Year of Education, 200,000 youthful brigades taught over 700,000 adults to read and write, taking the literacy rate to 96 percent. Pre-revolutionary Cuba had relatively high literacy rates and Castro's mass literacy campaign began long prior to 1959 by when it was already 77 percent, the fourth highest literacy rate in Latin America.[12] Castro's rebel army built local literacy boards and schools as it gained territory from 1953. This established an infrastructure on which the 1961 literacy campaign and subsequent education reforms could depend. Despite *el bloqueo*, the ongoing US embargoes and sanctions from 1958, which the UN estimates has cost Cuba $130 billion over six6 decades,[13] literacy in Cuba has remained close to 100 percent for 60 years.[14]

The Soviet literacy campaign took 22 years, from 1917 to 1939, to accomplish what took Britain, France, and Germany over 100 years.[15] Literacy was around 40 percent in 1917 but this masks huge differences between males and females and between rural and urban areas. Lenin and the Bolsheviks regarded literacy to be crucial to the success of the revolution. Investments in education were significantly increased and the whole system was radically overhauled. In the early years before the Stalinist bureaucracy took hold, there was space for innovative ideas and efforts were made to harness democratic energy from below.[16] The Soviet government established the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Liquidation of Illiteracy (Cheka Likbez) in 1920; 87 percent of the population was literate by 1939 and 99 percent by 1959.[17]

Tanzania's national literacy campaign grew out of Nyerere's vision for Ujamaa—African socialism and self-reliance. The national literacy campaign that began with the year of Adult Education in 1971 claimed to have doubled the adult literacy rate from 31 percent in 1969 to 61 percent four years, leading to demands for more schools.[18] Tanzania's national literacy efforts subsequently stagnated. Critics attribute this to be the ruling party's efforts to consolidate power and enhance productivity, giving in to the demands of structural adjustment rather than building on the enthusiasm for democratic participation from below. Nevertheless, the country's literacy rate inched up to 77 percent by 2015.

The struggles against illiteracy in South Korea and Vietnam offer an interesting comparison. Japan occupied both as well as their neighbour, China, during the Second World War. Thus, both were former colonies torn apart and devastated by Cold War conflicts after the Second World War. Korea lost over 3 million people, a staggering 15 percent of its population; Vietnam lost one-and-a-half million people.

12. Anders Breidlid (2007) Education in Cuba—An alternative educational discourse: lessons to be learned? Compare, 37(5), 617-634. Retrieved April 5, 2021, file:///C:/Users/hmclean/Documents/Education%20for%20Socialism/Response%20to%20Girin/Education_in_Cuba_an_alternative_educati.pdf

13. Reuters (2018) U.S. trade embargo has cost Cuba $130 billion, U.N. says. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-economy-un-idUSKBN1IA00T

14. Abel Prieto (1981) Cuba's National Literacy Campaign. Journal of Reading, 25(3), 215-221. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/40029025

15. Ben Eklof (2008) "Russian Literacy Campaigns 1861–1939" in Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff, eds., National Literacy Campaigns and Movements: Historical and Comparative Perspectives (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers), 128–29.

16. Maureen Perrie (1987) The Russian Working Class, 1905-1917. Theory and Society, 16(3), 431-446. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/657730

17. Boris N. Mironov (1991) The Development of Literacy in Russia and the USSR from the Tenth to the Twentieth Centuries. Retrieved April 06, 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/368437.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A2e6f8bdcf0b61868274be62deb819a60

18. Jeff Unsicker (1987) Tanzania's Literacy Campaign in Historical-Structural Perspective. In: Arnove R.F., Graff H.J. (eds) National Literacy Campaigns. Springer, Boston, MA. Retrieved April 06, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-0505-5_10

Korea's literacy rate was 33 percent in 1930. The Japanese occupation had done little to advance the Korean language or literacy and this statistic was practically unchanged 15 years later. After the Korean War in 1954, the five-year National Illiteracy Eradication Campaign took literacy to about 70 percent. This increased to 85 percent by 1968, and to over 90 percent in time UNESCO's International Literacy Year in 1990.

Soon after the Vietnamese Communists succeeded in seizing power in the 1945 August Revolution, Ho Chí Minh declared independence from France. He launched the *bình dân học vụ* (BDHV), or Popular Education movement, to eradicate illiteracy as 95 percent of Vietnamese people could not read or write. Within a year, 95,000 teachers had helped more than 2.5 million people become literate. These efforts persisted through the anti-colonial war against France from 1946, by the end of which 10,000,000 Vietnamese were literate.[19] Vietnam divided into north and south at the end of the colonial war, in 1954, but a civil war continued until the Vietcong victory in 1975. By 1979, 84 percent of the population of the country was literate; this figure reached 95 percent by 2018, a mirror image of the 1945 illiteracy rate.[20]

These histories show that, while there may be little correlation between a democratic state and a literate one, mass literacy was always a democratic project—an idea that enjoyed popular conviction and prevailed against great odds. Álvaro Linera, vice president of Bolivia from 2006 to 2019, makes a pertinent point: the task of a revolutionary movement is not merely to seize state power; it is to maintain vigilance to ensure that a fully participatory democracy is able to flourish.[21]

Looking forward again to the present, a time when most populations have relatively high literacy rates: the question for me is can we position FLN as a demand that finds democratic momentum? The fact that it needs to be dressed up as a crisis and flogged by global education institutions, national governments, and private foundations suggests that we shall not be able to. On the other hand, however, there are strong demands for the right to a quality education: people will always fight for an idea that furthers their livelihoods and their hopes. The challenge for global education leadership is to match these ambitions, not frustrate them; this will spur the democratic momentum we need to achieve FLN by the end of primary school.

A way of being free: Reading the word and the world[22]

"One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves."
— Ben Okri, A Way of Being Free

The available statistics on adult literacy (people from 15 years of age) suggest we are living in an age when mass literacy is doing relatively well. The earliest statistic for a global adult literacy rate is from before the Second World War from a study by the US Bureau of Education, which put it at 38 percent. In mid-last-century, just after the war, UNESCO's first director-general estimated that about half the world's population was literate.[23] Recent World Bank data indicate that the global adult literacy rate has increased steadily every year from 67 percent in 1976 to 86 percent in 2018.[24] The global literacy rate for youth (15-24 year-olds) was

19. Shaun K. Malarney (2011) Literacy for the Masses: the Conduct and Consequences of the Literacy Campaign in Revolutionary Vietnam. International Christian University, Tokyo. Retrieved April 06, 2021, https://www.linguapax-asia.org/pdf/publications/literacy-for-dialogue-in-multilingual-societies-2011/083-091-shaun-kingsley-malarney.pdf
20. Ngô Van Cát (1980). Chong Nan That Hoc (Against the Lack of Education). Hanoi: Nhà Xuat Ban Giáo Duc. Vietnamese Communist
21. Álvaro García Linera (2021) "How Socialists Can Win" interview in Jacobin Mag. Retrieved April 06, 2021, https://jacobinmag.com/2021/04/interview-alvaro-garcia-linera-mas-bolivia-coup/
22. Of course, Paulo Feire & Donaldo Macedo (1987) Reading the Word and the World. Routledge and Kegan.
23. John A. Smyth (2005) UNESCO's International Literacy Statistics 1950-2000. UNESDOC Digital Library. Retrieved April 10, 2021, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000146185
24. UNESCO (2020) Institute of Statistics Global Database. Retrieved April 10, 2021, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?end=2019&start=1970

91 percent in 2018, an increase from 83 percent two decades before.[25] Women's literacy consistently lags behind men's literacy, comprising up-to-two thirds of each of these figures. Taken at face value, it would appear that achieving SDG 4.6 by 2030—to ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy—except for women's literacy, is on track.[26]

The indicator for SDG 4.6 will monitor the "proportion of a population in a given age group achieving, at least, a fixed level of proficiency in *functional* literacy and numeracy skills." This presents a significant methodological challenge partly because reliable, comparable data is extremely hard to come by, and partly because common standards for functional literacy and numeracy are not yet validated.[27]

Consequently, what these global data actually reflect is unclear, they mask considerable variation and are likely to include high proportions of readers whose proficiencies are very low.

UNESCO's new definition of literacy is the "ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute; using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts." It recognizes that "literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society."[28]

This is a welcome development because it takes the notion of functional literacy two steps forward. First, by inviting a multiliteracies approach that recognises linguistic diversities and different literacies, such as information and digital literacy, and embracing various modes of communication, including online and visual.[29] Second, in emphasizing how literacy develops human potential and enables participation in community and wider society, it invokes the participative and transformative aspirations and the humanist perspectives of "critical literacy" developed by Paulo Freire and others.[30]

The SDGs include lifelong learning within a global policy framework for the first time—although, despite stating it in the goal statement, none of the targets for SDG 4 mentions adult education. The OECD's 1996 policy framework noted lifelong learning "requires good foundation skills among both youth and adults: particularly those with poor initial education."[31]

SDG 4.6 targets all youth, the age group from 15-24. An International Labour Organization (ILO) 2020 report on global employment trends for youth provides the following breakdown. The global population for this age group includes 20 percent (267 million) not in education, employment, or training; over two-thirds of whom are young women. Of employed young people, 30 percent live in extreme or moderate poverty, despite earning a wage. Over three-quarters are in informal work; 46 percent are own-account workers or contributing family workers.[32]

These are shocking figures.

Opportunities for continuing education beyond primary school incentivise commitments to achieving a solid grounding in FLN.[33] The World Bank recognizes

25. UNESCO (2019) Institute of Statistics Global Database. Retrieved April 10, 2021, https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/literacy/
26. UNESCO (2017) Target 4.6 – Literacy and Numeracy. Retrieved April 10, 2021, http://tcg.uis.unesco.org/target-4-6-literacy-and-numeracy/
27. Aaron Benevot (2018) "The invisible friend: adult education and the Sustain able Development Goals." In Role and Impact of Education. DVV International; Berlin. Retrieved April 08, 2021, file:///C:/Users/hmclean/Documents/NEW%20Education%20Program/The_invisible_friend_Adult_education_and.pdf
28. Silvia Montoya (2018) Meet the SDG 4 Data: Measuring Youth and Adult Literacy and Numeracy. Retrieved April 10, 2021, http://uis.unesco.org/en/blog/meet-sdg-4-data-measuring-youth-and-adult-literacy-and-numeracy
29. Mary Kalantzis, Bill Cope, Eveline Chan, Leanne Dalley-Trim (2016) Literacies. Cambridge University Press
30. Chapter 7 of Literacies (Kalantzis et al, 2016) provides a handy summary of the main proponents of critical literacy: Michael Apple, William Ayers, Barbara Comber, Ann Dyson, Paulo Freire, and others. Retrieved April 09, 2021, https://newlearningonline.com/literacies/chapter-7/giroux-on-postmodern-education
31. OECD (2001) Lifelong Learning for all Policy Directions. Retrieved April 10, 2021, https://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=DEELSA/ED/CERI/CD(2000)12/PART1/REV2&docLanguage=En#:~:text=In%201996%2C%20OECD%20Education%20Ministers,yet%20a%20reality%20for%20all.&text=Second%2C%20lifelong%20learning%20requires%20good,those%20with%20poor%20initial%20education.
32. ILO (2020) Global Employment Trends for Youth 2020. Retrieved April 10, 2021, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_737648.pdf
33. Albert Bandura (1997) Self-Efficacy. The exercise of control. New York: Freeman & Co. Bandura defines four factors that are at the heart of the belief in one's own effectiveness (self-efficacy): (1) mastery experiences, (2) vicarious experiences of others, (3) effective persuaders, and (4) a positive social-emotional climate.

the importance of strengthening whole education systems so that improvements in FLN might be sustained and scaled-up to support further education outcomes.[34]

This frame switch positions prioritising FLN inter-generationally. It reveals the literacies of youth and adults are interlinked parts of the same metanarrative: to engage the contemporary world in ways that are functionally competent, critically perceptive, and democratically assertive, requires multiliteracies. Higher functionality in all literacies significantly depends on the hope of a real chance to continue education beyond primary school.[35]

What is it about? As if a school has to be about only one thing

"Why did people ask "What is it about?" as if a novel had to be about only one thing."
— Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Americanah

Imagine a regular school day in a regular primary school in a LIC, perhaps in sub-Saharan Africa. The school is fully on board with the mission to prioritize foundational literacy and numeracy and accomplish it thoroughly; let us assume national standards are available and they have strong buy-in from teachers. What happens; what will the school do differently than what it does now; and how should the education department support this?

Here are eight things the education department and the school might consider.

1. Cut unnecessary paperwork for teachers

The administrative workload of teachers, including "number crunching" (recording, analysing, and monitoring data), has been cause for concern for a long time: it takes more time than lesson preparation and is one of the major cause of teachers leaving the profession. [36]One of the most useful things that schools and education departments can do to support the focus on FLN is to streamline administrative and data management tasks. Schools could use teachers' time more efficiently, enabling them to devote more time to teaching-related work, professional development, and learning.[37]

2. Establish teacher-led communities of practice and support professional development

Established good practice on teacher professional development emphasises the importance of having the opportunity to share experiences with colleagues. Schools and education departments could promote teacher-led communities of practice as a regular part of teacher professional development and supporting new teachers in the profession. Teacher-led communities of practice will certainly support the development of better methodologies for numeracy and literacy. Their discussion is never going to be limited to these two competencies only and is certain to focus more broadly on foundational learning and quality education.[38]

3. Ensure school inspections are supportive of the work of teachers and schools

It is unlikely that many schools or teachers find visits by school inspectors to be helpful for their work. If

34. World Bank (2019) Brief | Learning Poverty. Retrieved April 10, 2021, https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/learning-poverty
35. Margaret Merga (2019) Reading Engagement for Tweens and Teens: What Would Make Them Read More? Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO/Libraries Unlimited. - Jace Pillay (2018) Hope for the Future and Literacy Achievement in a Sample of Impoverished South African Primary School Children. Retrieved April 08, 2021, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/18146627.2016.1224601
36. GL Assessment (2019) Crunched by numbers: how effective data can reduce teachers' workload. Retrieved April 23, 2021 https://reports.gl-assessment.co.uk/workload/home/
37. Kyung-Nyun Kim (2019) Teachers' administrative workload crowding out instructional activities. Retrieved April 08, 2021 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02188791.2019.1572592. - Filip Van Droogenbroeck, Bram Spruyt, Christophe, Vanroelen (2014) Burnout among senior teachers: Investigating the role of workload and interpersonal relationships at work Teaching and Teacher Education Volume 43, October 2014, Pages 99-109. Retrieved April 08, 2021 https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0742051X1400081X. - Susan McGrath-Champ, Scott Fitzgerald, Meghan Stacey, Rachel Wilson (2018) Understanding Work in Schools: Report to the NSW Teachers Federation. University of Sydney. Retrieved April 08, 2021 https://www.school-news.com.au/news/teachers-spending-longer-hours-on-data-collection-and-paperwork-report-reveals/
38. David Frost (2017) Empowering teachers as agents of change: a non-positional approach to teacher leadership. University of Cambridge. - E. Wenger (1998) Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

the role of school inspectors focuses more on support than sanction, this would assist foundational learning as well as subject-specific knowledge. Jika iMfundo, a South African collaborative project run by teachers' unions, the education department, and business, promotes an approach to school inspections that centres on the question: "How can I help you?" Data emerging from this multi-year project in several thousand schools indicates a "deepening shift" towards practices that support collegiality and generate professional learning.[39]

4. Promote foundational literacy and numeracy across the curriculum

Literacy is not the language teacher's job, numeracy is not the maths teacher's job. Foundational literacy and numeracy are not separate areas of learning; they simply require methodological approaches that teachers can build into all subjects. In this respect, developing FLN and improving the quality of education are mutually supportive objectives. There is plenty of established evidence to show that numeracy and mathematics, and language and literacy, need to be reinforced across the curriculum.[40]

5. Recognise play and extracurricular activities as crucial for FLN and education quality

The value of play and other extracurricular activities are as indispensible for effective foundational learning as they are for improving overall education quality. This is not only particularly true for younger children; it remains valid throughout education. Varied activities in school are not only necessary for recreational reasons; they are crucial for developing relationships and communication skills that provide vital scaffolding for learning. These activities will greatly support learning when they are an intentional part of the school programme.[41]

6. Invest in school libraries

The growing school library literature provides ample evidence that school libraries have a significant effect on student achievement. They are particularly important for children from lower-income status homes. School libraries provide an important link between schooling and lifelong learning through public libraries. In smaller or poorer communities where at-home resources may be limited, school libraries can encourage multiliteracies though providing a wider range of resources that children may not otherwise have access to: including books, multimedia, and internet. Spending money on increased national testing rather than better-equipped libraries is a political choice, not an education choice.[42]

39. John Roberts (2020) 'Basic errors': 6 complaints about Ofsted inspections. Times Education Supplement ~ TES Retrieved April 17, 2021 https://www.tes.com/news/basic-errors-6-complaints-about-ofsted-inspections - Mary Metcalfe (2018) Learning about sustainable change in education campaign 2015-2017. Published in: Christie, P. & Monyokolo, M. (Eds). Saide: Johannesburg. Retrieved April 08, 2021 https://saide.org.za/books/sustainable-change/book/text/01-02.html

40. Rebecca Abler (2010) How Important Is Teaching Literacy in All Content Areas? Edutopia. Retrieved April 10, 2021, https://www.edutopia.org/blog/literacy-instruction-across-curriculum-importance. - DoE (2014) The national curriculum in England: Framework document. Retrieved April 10, 2021 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/381344/Master_final_national_curriculum_28_Nov.pdf

41. Bangalore N. Roopesh (1918) All Work and No Play: The Importance of Extracurricular Activities in the Development of Children. Positive Schooling and Child Development, pp 287-301.
- Israel Kariyana, Cosmas Maphosa &Beginner Mapuranga (2012) The Influence of Learners' Participation in School Co-curricular Activities on Academic Performance: Assessment of Educators' Perceptions. Journal of Social Sciences. Volume 33, 2012 - Issue 2
- Marianne Schuepbach (2015) Effects of extracurricular activities and their quality on primary school-age students' achievement in mathematics in Switzerland. In School Effectiveness and School Improvement An International Journal of Research, Policy and Practice.
- Dana Miller, Kathy Tichota, Joyce White (2015) Young Children's Authentic Play in a Nature Explore Classroom Supports Foundational Learning: A Single Case Study. Retrieved April 20, 2021, https://dimensionsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/youngchildrenauthenticplay.pdf

42. So-Young Kim (2011) School Libraries as Old but New Supports for Education in Japan: A Review of Japan's National Curriculum for Elementary Schools. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG
- Dianne Olberg (2002) Looking for the evidence: Do school libraries improve student achievement? School Libraries in Canada; Ontario Vol. 22, Iss. 2. Retrieved April 20, 2021, https://search.proquest.com/docview/222527406?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true

7. Reach out to parents, families, and communities

Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. This is particularly true for at-home parenting in the early years but continues to be important throughout schooling. Parents who are unable to spend as much time as they would like to in supporting their children's FLN needs and those who are less confident about their own reading, need help. Effective school-community relationships can maximise improvements in foundational learning. Interventions could include encouraging parents to join public libraries, providing joint reading programs for parents and children, and finding ways to enlist the help older siblings who are able to read.[43]

8. Support transitions into, as well as out of, primary school

"School readiness" with respect to the transition into primary school is a contested idea. The debate revolves around what readiness entails and whether it means getting children ready for school or getting schools ready for children. Readiness cannot be a benchmark event that children either pass or fail, it is a process that involves developing a range of mutually reinforcing capabilities. Of these, social and emotional skills are probably key: these involve the ability to take instruction, get along with others, solve problems, and think independently and critically. It is not helpful to reduce foundational learning to numeracy and literacy, the two things that happen to be the easiest skills to measure. Similarly, transitions from primary to secondary education do not involve only reading and writing. Human transitions throughout life, not just those from primary to secondary school, are about relationships, communication, self- confidence, and curiosity—schools need a well-rounded programme to develop these well.[44] Primary schools need a broader working concept of foundational learning.

This frame switch to Girin's narrative places prioritising FLN in the reality of a normal day in a regular primary school, revealing the supposed choice between a narrow or shallow approach to be a false one. It demonstrates why prioritisation cannot mean narrowing the education experience so that children learn to read, write, count, and add without doing anything else all day, every day.[45] When we locate literacy and numeracy within the reality of the school, the discussion is broader and about foundational learning rather than a two-dimensional one about FLN: this is both necessary and entirely feasible. Getting serious about foundational learning provides a catalyst for improving education quality across a range of dimensions; these, in turn, provide incentive and opportunity for improving foundational learning. To achieve minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics by the end of primary school, we need to go deep and broad at the same time.

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44. Agnieszka Bates (2019) A. Readiness for School, Time and Ethics in Educational Practice. Stud Philos Educ 38, 411–426 (2019). Retrieved April 20, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-018-9643-2

- Sadaf Shallwani (2009) The Social Construction of School Readiness. CIES paper. Retrieved April 20, 2021, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED529814.pdf

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45. https://www.sqw.co.uk/insights-and-publications/evaluation-of-the-national-literacy-and-numeracy-programmes/

You can't forbid them to learn? The politics of education aid

"You can't forbid them to learn; knowledge belongs to all men."
— Karamakate: The Embrace of the Serpent

I was fortunate to go to a lunch with H. S. Bhola when he visited South Africa in the early 1990s. He made a remark that has always stuck with me; I trust it remains relatively unembellished in my memory. When asked about education in China, he admired its increasing reach and organisation but wondered "if a system that did not allow plenty of room for endless pointless confusion could ever be trusted."[46] It was a throwaway remark, which I understood not as a preference for confusion but as an expression of his commitment to critical enquiry in the Freirean sense. At the risk of seeming overly Gramscian, I have similar concerns about the notion of an international architecture for education that can be broken, or more to the point, fixed.

This frame switch relocates the narrative on prioritising FLN at the level of global education governance, revisiting assumptions of what this entails and who it involves. Girin refers to "the global education architecture" and to "a global education community." Towards the end of his essay we get to see exactly who he regards them to be as he politely gives each of them homework. They include policymakers in LICS (i.e., national governments), the Global Partnership for Education, UNESCO, the World Bank, bilateral donors, CSOs, and NGOs.[47] Girin thus addresses a primarily policy and finance decision-making but also decision-influencing global education community.

For the bulk of his essay, however, Girin draws on Nicholas Burnett's grumpy account of a broken international education architecture.[48] For Burnett, this includes "the set of international agencies and institutions, official and unofficial, public and private that receive international resources to support countries' educational development." In a lengthy footnote, Burnett tweaks this definition to include "bodies that set and *follow* international policy for education," (my emphasis) he then adds teachers and teachers' unions, private schools, and others in a long, what he calls a "non-exhaustive" list, which seems to imply almost everyone except, curiously, national governments.

The problem with calling the global governance actors in education a "community" is that this implies trust and accessibility among members; calling it an "architecture" implies design and structure. It has none of these attributes. I have other difficulties with most notions of global governance. Typically, they do not offer conceptual clarity on who is included and who is not; they lump together very different actors ignoring their unequal policy and financial power; and they do not distinguish organisations that focus on global governance from those that engage global governance but have primary affiliations to national or to civil society constituencies. For global governance to be both effective and credible it must have adequate mechanisms for accountability but it also needs to accommodate advocacy. All this should be better resolved if we are going to admonish global governance for failing, or call on it to act.

In *The Embrace of the Serpent*, Karamakate, the last of his Amazonian tribe—played by director, Antonio Bolívar Salvador, himself among the last of the Colombian Amazon Ocaina—tells the American explorer: "I wasn't meant to teach my people. I was meant to teach you." It is a line to remind global actors, at a time when modern technologies, industries, trade and waste are destroying the planet, that we need to listen more to the people we intend to teach.

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46. He picks up on related observations in: H.S. Bhola (1998) They are learning and discerning: an evaluation of an adult literacy project of the National Literacy Cooperation of South Africa. Studies in Educational Evaluation, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 153-177. Retrieved April 10, 2021, https://www.sciencedirect.com/sdfe/pdf/download/eid/1-s2.0-S0191491X98000091/first-page-pdf

47. Civil society organisations – CSOs, Global Partnership for Education – GPE, Lower Income Countries – LICs, non-government organisations – NGOs.

48. Nicholas Burnett (2019) International Journal of Educational Development Volume 68, July 2019, Pages 15-19 Retrieved April 10, 2021, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0738059319303633#fn0015

The emergence of the "new public management" consensus

"Work it harder, make it better. Do it faster, makes us stronger. "
– Daft Punk: Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger

The three leadership functions Girin draws from Burnett—prioritisation linked to specific outcomes, measurement, and accountability—are central ideas in the new public management (NPM)[49] consensus that has emerged as the new orthodoxy in global governance over the past 30 years. NPM emerged in Anglo-Saxon countries in the late 1970s and early 1980s: its narratives promote managerialism; performance and outcomes measurement; as well as the growth of markets, commercialisation, and competition in public services.[50]

The NPM consensus in education is rather specifically concerned with quality in education; not quality in a general sense, which is too broad a notion to manage effectively, but quality in a more limited, precise sense—the specific measurement of only selected elements of quality. The progressive education movement, at least since Dewey, who associated quality in education with quality in life,[51] has always championed a more expansive idea of education quality. Education quality was a central concern for the Jomtien conference on Education for All in 1990. Quality is central to the Dakar Framework for Action and it comprised one of the six EFA goals. Quality and literacy are fundamental to the right to education for the self-evident reason that there is no point to having a right to education if it is not going to teach you to read.

The dictum attributed to Drucker,[52] "what gets measured gets managed,"[53] has been a central dogma of the new orthodoxy since business management ideas started being applied in public policy management from the 1960s. International and comparative education studies provide a hotbed for measurement. IEA—the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement—the organisation that started the first ILSAs—International Large Scale Assessments—was the key institution undertaking comparative tests of learning across countries between 1958 and the late 1980s. The Conference of Education Ministers of Francophone Countries (CONFEMEN) created PASEC[54]—the Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems—in 1991. The Latin-American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education created Laboratorio[55] in 1994. Fifteen ministries of education came together to form SACMEQ—the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality—in 1995.

The OECD launched its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 1997; the first study was in 2000, and it now covers over 80 countries. UNESCO established the UIS, its Institute of Statistics, in 1999 to deliver accurate, policy-relevant comparative education statistics. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) focused on two of the EFA goals—universal primary education (UPE) and gender parity—these goals were also relatively easier to measure.[56] World

49. For a seminal account of New Public Management (NPA), see Christopher Hood's (1991) "A public management for all seasons." Public Administration Vol. 69 (3-19). Retrieved 15Apr21, at https://eclass.uoa.gr/modules/document/file.php/PSPA108/4NMP%20all%20seasonsfulltext.pdf
50. Ewan Ferlie (2017) The New Public Management and Public Management Studies. Retrieved 16Apr21, at https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.013.129
51. David T. Hansen (2007) John Dewey on Education and the Quality of Life. In Ethical Visions of Education: Philosophies In Practice, David Hanson (ed.) Teachers College Press: New York.
52. Obituary in NYT: Barnaby J. Feder (Nov. 12, 2005) Pioneer in Social and Management Theory, Is Dead at 95 https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/12/business/peter-f-drucker-a-pioneer-in-social-and-management-theory-is-dead.html
53. Interestingly, the original insight was to point out: "...even when it's pointless to measure and manage it, and even if it harms the purpose of the organisation to do so." For an informative comment on this idea see: Simon Caulkin (10Feb2008) The rule is simple: be careful what you measure. https://www.theguardian.com/business/2008/feb/10/businesscomment1
54. Official French title: "*Programme d'analyse des systèmes éducatifs de la CONFEMEN*", where CONFEMEN stands for "*Conférence des ministres de l'éducation des pays ayant le français en partage*".
55. *Latinoamericano de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación*
56. REBECCA WINTHROP & KATE ANDERSON SIMONS Can International Large-Scale Assessments Inform a Global Learning Goal? Insights from the Learning Metrics Task Force. Research in Comparative & International Education Volume 8 Number 3 2013. Retrieved 15Apr21, at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2304/rcie.2013.8.3.279

Bank economists proposed a Millennium Learning Goal (MLG) in 2007 as a critique of MDG 2A (which focused on access to UPE).[57] This presented an alternative methodology for measuring a "plausible minimal competency level": like PISA, it focused on mathematics, reading, and science for 15-year olds.

The Common Core provides a perfect case study of the NPM consensus in the United States. It gained traction from the narrative that students were not learning what they ought to; prescribed standards for English and maths at every grade level; emphasized measurable outcomes and benchmarking for accountability and monitoring progress. This sounds familiar. Since its launch in 2010, the Gates Foundation has spent about $400 million on the Common Core; the 46 states that adopted it have spent several trillion dollars more. Ten years on, there is still insufficient evidence to show that it has improved student achievement, and by 2021, 16 of the states that adopted the Common Core have begun or passed legislation to repeal it.[58] Gates himself accepted that the Common Core was failing by 2017.[59]

Brookings and UIS established the Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF), which was funded by Hewlett, in 2012. The LMTF focused on "access plus learning," with "learning" a proxy gerund for quality, and worked through how to measure quality across seven domains—a reassuringly comprehensive perspective on education quality. In anticipation of the inevitable pressure to measure quality more closely in the SDGs, the LMTF reflected an insight to ensure that quality should drive measurement rather than measurement drive quality.[60] USAID funded and piloted EGRA and EGMA in over 40 countries by 2011 even before the LMTF was born. The metrics-driven accountability implicit in all of these methodologies was explicitly formulated in the DAC evaluation principles[61] in 1991.

DAC emphasized development through learning from experience and accountability to donors, national governments and taxpayers.

Given the dominance of the NPM logics and narrative in global education governance and the fixation on measurement and accountability over the past three decades, we might be forgiven for thinking Girin is prescribing more of the same. His call to marshal all effort to teach all children in sub-Saharan Africa to read is compelling. However, this frame switch to his narrative suggests there might be two reasons why Girin's carefully crafted asks of the global education community might not garner the agreement he seeks. The first involves the realpolitik of global agreements: the minority-world, majority-world tensions that have played out since the colonial period as East versus West and North versus South; the second involves a weariness with the crisis narrative.

The realpolitik of global education governance

"You are the victim of men who think they are right."
– Col. John Lawrence: Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence

Girin argues the real choice we must make is between tacit and explicit prioritisation, that constrained finances will force us to prioritise. In citing the example of an inspiring city municipality, he positions his argument on the ground where real choices are made. Sobral has the best primary schools and highest reading scores in Brazil, despite being located in Ceará, a state with the fifth-lowest per capita GDP in the country. The municipality resolutely focuses on FLN; a closer look, however, reveals just how many other things have to be in place for prioritising FLN to provide any traction.

57. Filmer, D., A. Hasan, and L. Pritchett. 2006. A Millennium Learning Goal: Measuring real progress in education. Working Paper 97. Washington DC: Center for Global Development. Retrieved 15Apr21, at https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.580.6749&rep=rep1&type=pdf

58. Retrieved 15Apr21, https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/common-core-states

59. Jeff Polet (2017) Gates admits Common Core failure, then doubles down on it. Philanthropy Daily. Retrieved 15Apr21, https://www.philanthropydaily.com/gates-philanthropy-failure-common-core/

60. Physical well-being, social & emotional, culture & the arts, literacy and communication, learning approaches and cognition, numeracy and mathematics, science and technology. Retrieved 15Apr21, at https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/LMTFRpt1TowardUnivrslLearning.pdf

61. Development Assistance Committee DAC (1991) Principles for the evaluation of development assistance. Retrieved 15Apr21, at https://www.oecd.org/derec/dacnetwork/35343400.pdf

Cruz and Loureiro's study,[62] which Girin cites, points out that this outcome took 15 years to achieve from 2005. They credit four policy pillars for this achievement. The first three are familiar: (1) a focused curriculum with clear sequencing and prioritisation of foundational learning, not just FLN; (2) effective student assessments; (3) autonomous, accountable management and meritocratic appointments. The fourth is new: (4) prepared and motivated teachers. The city of Sobral is a poster child for the World Bank's "learning poverty" thrust; the write-up reflects the writers' NPM-tinted spectacles. For me, it demonstrates how systemically embedded and broadly comprehensive "prioritising FLN" needs to be. Active engagement by teachers, parents, and communities, in addition to sound management, are crucial. To its credit, the study acknowledges the improved infrastructure, transportation, school meals, and teacher career plan that were established in the eight years before any focus on foundational learning was made.

Not mentioned in the World Bank study, however, is Sobral's part in the redemocratisation process Brazil enjoyed after 20 years of military dictatorship, or Ceará's and Sobral's democratic socialist credentials. There were, in fact, constant improvements in education between 1997 and 2004, the period before prioritisation; these included a 148-percent increase in enrolments, an increase in literacy from 40 percent to 90.7 percent by the end year one in primary school, and the construction of 11 new schools. If this is what prioritisation means, we have a lot more to agree on than to disagree on.

It remains true that constrained finances force choices. What Sobral, and any other local administration that is not in the grip of central government, corporations,

gangs, war, or natural disaster demonstrates, is that democratic, local decision-making means everything. It means having to prioritise but it will show that despite constrained financing, what matters most is that aid is catalytic when it reinforces local choices.

To frame switch back to the global from the local: the SDGs do not reflect a thoroughly democratic process, strictly, they do not reflect consensus either. Dapo Akande points out that there is no consensus on the meaning of "consensus"[63] and the word often comes to mean the opposite of its common meaning when international bodies pass agreements that have not garnered full support.[64]

However, the UN's "global conversations" around the SDG's engaged nearly 2 million people from 88 countries on the education SDG. Seven million people responded to the My World survey; in response to a question asking what global policy priorities mattered most to them and their families, they selected "a good education" and "better healthcare" as their top priorities.[65] The SDGs reflect many compromises, but they have legitimacy and they carry a globally agreed mandate. This cannot simply be jettisoned if someone thinks they have a better idea.

The crisis narrative

"First there was the collapse of civilization: anarchy, genocide, starvation. Then when it seemed things couldn't get any worse, we got the plague."
– Fender Tremolo: Cyborg

Naming a crisis is always a political choice: Janet Roitman[66] argues that policy discourse invokes the idea of

62. Louisee Cruz, Andre Loureiro (2020) Achieving World-Class Education in Adverse Socioeconomic Conditions: The Case of Sobral in Brazil. World Bank Document. Retrieved 15Apr21, at http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/143291593675433703/pdf/Achieving-World-Class-Education-in-Adverse-Socioeconomic-Conditions-The-Case-of-Sobral-in-Brazil.pdf
63. Dapo Akande (2013) 'What is the Meaning of "Consensus" in International Decision Making? Retrieved 17Apr21, at https://www.ejiltalk.org/negotiations-on-arms-trade-treaty-fail-to-adopt-treaty-by-consensus-what-is-the-meaning-of-consensus-in-international-decision-making/
64. Christopher Paris (2018) ISO's Orwellian Definition of "Consensus" Should Scare the Pants Off of You. Oxbridge Quality Resources International. Retrieved 17Apr21, at https://www.oxebridge.com/emma/isos-orwellian-definition-of-consensus-should-scare-the-pants-off-of-you/
65. Aaron Benavot (2018) The invisible friend: adult education and the Sustainable Development Goals. DVV International. Retrieved 17Apr21, at https://www.dvv-international.de/en/adult-education-and-development/editions/section-1-playing-a-role/introduction/the-invisible-friend-adult-education-and-the-sustainable-development-goals
66. Roitman, J. (2014) Anti-Crisis, Durham & London: Duke University Press.

crisis in order to construct narratives that designate a "moment of truth." This will not be an absolute or indisputable truth, but an observation of truth from the observer's vantage point; its purpose is to produce a particular, intended meaning. Roitman observes that:

> "Once we call a problem a crisis we begin to engage in a series of logically interconnected steps that unleashes a characteristic pattern of reasoning. The pattern is familiar and it can be comforting, but it is neither original nor is it innovative."

Education policy discussions in the public sphere frequently employ a language of crisis.[67] In the 1960s and 1980s, there were concerns about a "world educational crisis" in the Global South. The 1983 Nation at Risk education report generated alarm in the US at the "rising tide of mediocrity" that was threatening the future of the country.[68] Ten years later, there were concerns about a "world crisis" in adult literacy. Each of these "moments of truth" drew public attention to concerns teachers would have been facing every day and are most likely still facing. If the public attention to the crises was helpful, if teachers are still dealing with it, or whether the crisis morphed into something else, is less clear. The current "global learning crisis" does not denote a new situation: learning is not necessarily worse now than it was before. We do know that this "crisis" spurs on a selective narrative about learning metrics, accountability, a broken international architecture for education, the World Bank's new idea about "learning poverty" and the prioritisation of FLN within SDG 4. Naming a crisis is always a political choice.

Conclusion: Things to see and feel

> "You see, some things I can teach you. Some you learn from books. But there are things that, well, you have to see and feel."
> – Khaled Hosseini, A Thousand Splendid Suns

Girin is correct that without reading and numeracy there is no access to the rest of education. However, I hope the frame switches this essay offers to his narrative are persuasive on the following realisations.

First, there is a longer historic trajectory to foundational literacy and numeracy than Girin's narrative gives us. This history shows us that democratic momentum and a responding political commitment from national government are what matter most. We live in a time of relatively high literacy rates but also very sharp disparities, most significantly in LICs and sub-Saharan Africa. Girin invites policymakers in these countries to choose to make FLN a priority. This is good, any response at the level of global education governance can only be reciprocal to the demand and commitment that is realised at country level.

Most educators will insist that improving outcomes in FLN is inseparable from improving foundational learning more broadly. There is everything to gain from reconceptualising foundational learning as a democratic project rather than a purely technocratic one. This may require thinking (theory) and doing (practice) that is outside of the current policy consensus; it will mean engaging education's major constituents and stakeholders, teachers, students, parents as well as

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67. Aaron Benavot and William C. Smith (2020) Reshaping Quality and Equity: Global Learning Metrics as a Ready-Made Solution to a Manufactured Crisis. In: Antonia Wulff, Grading Goal Four, Brill: Leiden. Retrieved 17Apr21, at https://brill.com/view/book/edcoll/9789004430365/BP000019.xml?body=fullHtml-43184

68. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education United States Department of Education. Retrieved 29Apr21, at https://edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/A_Nation_At_Risk_1983.pdf

communities, local government and business in a far more collaborative effort. A groundswell of support is not something money can buy: grants and loans will buy actions and outcomes but national, and ultimately local, ownership makes the difference for thorough-going and sustainable change. A focus on foundational literacy and numeracy is a catalytic opportunity for building systems that can deliver quality education from primary through to the end of secondary schooling. This, after all, is the ambition of SDG target 4.1: "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes."

Second, making progress on SDG target 4.6—"By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy"—is crucial precisely because it targets those who did not have an opportunity to develop their foundational education. Progress on this target in LICs and sub-Saharan Africa, and wherever else populations are not highly literate, would greatly reinforce progress on FLN by the end of primary as stipulated in SDG indicator 4.1.1(b). Communities and families do not divide into separate categories by age; if we are to realise gains in achieving SDG 4.1, this will mobilise opportunity and reciprocal momentum for SDG target 4.6.

My invitation to those who have chosen to focus on FLN as a priority, particularly in LICs and sub-Saharan Africa, would be to promote a policy environment that supports broader approaches to FLN. These may include supporting programs in schools to adopt intergenerational approaches, particularly those that draw in families, community members, and older youth. These will contribute to and benefit from FLN programs in schools. It will take political imagination to mobilise society and the economy to respond to these aspirations but doing so will meet with enormous resourcefulness and energy.

Third, the reality of teaching numeracy and literacy every day in an actual primary school reveals the notion of prioritising FLN to be hyperbolic. Numeracy and literacy so interlink with everything else a school needs to do just to make it to lunchtime, it will take too much effort and be too artificial to "extract" them. All the other components of a sensible approach to foundational learning are mutually reinforcing for numeracy and literacy. Indicator SDG 4.1.1 focuses on the:

> *"Proportion of children and young people: (a) in grades 2/3; (b) at the end of primary; and (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex."*

Most teachers and schools already have light-touch indicators, implicitly or explicitly, for the harder-to-measure components of foundational learning. It is entirely feasible to monitor these and manage them well at school, district, and national levels through a combination of self-reporting, and school inspections. These data will present challenges for reliable comparison globally, as do the prevailing normative quantitative approaches. The politics of education measurement are too complex to do any justice here but the education sector would benefit from a critical discussion on different indicator paradigms, the guidance they may offer for global governance and national governments, and the opportunity they offer for advocacy and accountability. It would also be helpful for this global debate to see more meta-evaluation critical research of the systemic outcomes of USAID's decade-long focus on promoting FNL in recipient countries.

Fourth, the mandate of global agreements is important; unilateral changes, whether tactical or implicit, undermine the principles of international collaboration and global governance. Global organisations also need to respond to what nations, particularly those facing crises, define as their own priorities; it would be an overreach to impose priorities or override

national ambitions.[69] The role of global governance is to balance and calibrate what international education aid commits to providing and what countries feel compelled themselves to achieve.

The SDGs propose a radical set of propositions; they are not a wish list from the Global South to the Global North. They challenge all national governments on their democratic mandate; they challenge global geo-politics and the terms of world trade and; they challenge mutual accountabilities around international collaboration and international aid. The SDGs enjoy legitimacy because the UN, however flawed, is the only globally representative body there is. SDG 4 has added legitimacy because it was exemplary in its inclusive, consultative process.

My quibble with crisis talk is not because I wish to detract in any way from the urgency of teaching children to read by the end of primary school; it is because I find Roitman profound on how crises create blind spots in our thinking and that these enable particular ideas, actors, and actions while obscuring others. Girin's contextual frame for his narrative foregrounds decision-makers rather than teachers; FLN rather than foundational learning; primary education rather than pre-school or secondary education; time-bound interventions rather than systems; NPM rather than participatory management or social accountability; and fiscal restraints rather than redistributive stimuli. These, like

what you call a crisis and what you do not, are political choices.

Finally, if the world's political and financial systems cannot deliver the sustainable development that everybody wants, and to which the SDGs aspire, the problem is about global capitalism, not about what people want. The last line of Girin's compelling essay suggests that anyone who does not agree with what he says should recommend another way forward, provided it "retains contact with fiscal realities." This suggests a there-is-no-alternative rationale for his narrative when many question precisely the "fiscal realities" to which he refers. I am sure Girin simply means "do the best with what you have," but his last line implies two arguments he does not intend to make. The first, an austerity argument that children must learn to read by ten years-of-age because there will be no state money to teach them anything else after that, the second, a colonial argument that this is valid for children in LICs and especially sub-Saharan Africa—there are other ambitions for children in the Global North.

Rushdie was only half-right that "the only people who see the whole picture are the ones who step out of the frame." He omits to mention they will find themselves in another picture inside another frame, which is precisely why "reading the world not just the word" and receiving a quality education matter so much.

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69. Burnett (ibid) suggests the contrary: "[international leadership in education] is a failure, however, in at least two important, related dimensions. First, it does not suggest priorities, leaving these to individual countries."

Why Haven't We Prioritised Early Grade Literacy and Numeracy?

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Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 is ambitious: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." It encompasses a broad range of sub-goals including early childhood development through to young people entering the workforce, as well as education inputs such as teacher quality, infrastructure, and technology. While this reflects the complexity of education and correctly identifies the various building blocks, it raises the question: Amongst so many priorities, can foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) skills be prioritised? Girin responds that FLN has not been prioritised for reasons beyond competing priorities or overall system complexities. The reasons are, firstly, a lack of political demand for FLN; secondly, a perception that FLN skills have been mastered. In this essay, I reflect on these two reasons based on the South African experience, offering cases where the reasons hold true but also attempting to provide a deeper rationale for these decisions and the divergences and opportunities that have begun to emerge.

Tertiary education is a clear priority for all of society

The 2018 General Household Survey collected from a nationally representative 22,000 households in South Africa shows a steady decline in complaints about education. The "lack of books category" had the most complaints about both secondary and primary schools, peaking at approximately 9 percent for secondary schools in 2012 and declining to approximately 3.5 percent in 2018, with a similar pattern for primary schools, peaking at 5.5 percent in 2011 and declining to approximately 2.5 percent in 2018. During this same period, Municipal IQ, 2019 reported 237 major service delivery protests across the country, mostly based on lack of services such as rubbish collection, lack of housing, water shortages, and poor local government accountability, clearly demonstrating an active citizenry not afraid of voicing dissatisfaction with government service delivery.

What is striking, though, is that none of these protests was about education outcomes in either primary or secondary schooling. While the specific statistic provided is from 2018, it reflects a long-standing absence. The only exception was the tertiary education protests #FeesMustFall between 2015 and 2016. While university students had protested previously, the 2015 to 2016 protests were national, with students expressing dissatisfaction about high fees, the exclusionary language of instruction policies in universities, and student accommodation challenges, amongst others (Mavunga, 2019). The response from the government was an increase of approximately R17 billion (US$1.2 billion) for universities over three years, directly responding to the student issues raised. This is by far the largest increase in government spending based on issues raised by students or concerning student access and outcomes.

While teachers in primary and secondary education have historically protested for higher salaries, the #FeesMustFall protests demonstrate that student outcomes and experiences can be powerful political and financial drivers. However, as argued by Girin, it is hard to imagine the same agency, political, and social pressure levers for FLN.

We do not yet have a shared understanding of exactly how poor early learning outcomes are

Building on the work of Pritchett (2004) and Hanushek and Woessmann (2008) Spaull and Taylor, (2015) provide a new measure that reflects both access to schooling and FLN learning outcomes. By combining learner outcomes data from the 2000 and 2007 Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SEACMEQ) and Demographic and Health Survey data for 11 Southern and East African countries, they produce an "Access-to-Learning" measure at the grade 6 level. Their findings confirm the critique of historical international education goals that focused on access and enrolment without relating them to quality. At the same time, it highlights the limitations of looking only at outcome data, without simultaneously looking at enrolment.

If we look at Table 1, we see South Africa was ranked 8th out of 15 countries participating in SEACMEQ. However, after calculating the access-to-learning rate using the country demographic survey (or General Household Survey as it is known in South Africa) as well as a grade survival measure, South Africa is ranked 5th in access to literacy and 6th in access to numeracy. The most noteworthy case, however, is Swaziland (now renamed Eswatini), which ranked 5th in SEACMEQ and 1st in both access-to-literacy and access-to-numeracy.

The access-to-learning measure demonstrates the need for an earlier focus on learning as proposed in the broader FLN arguments. A key assumption in this work is that learners who have not completed grade 6—or in other words, who have not "survived the grade"—are not found because they have dropped out, which reflects poor foundational skills. This is a significant shift to typical practice where the calculation of survival rates is often done amongst education stakeholders as part of the interpretation of school leaving results at the end of secondary schooling. This work clearly demonstrates how this practice masks early learning deficits. It is already apparent that by the end of primary schooling, learning gaps are leading to learner drop-outs, and a narrow focus on only those found in secondary schools is inherently biased.

Unfortunately, this kind of analysis is not common, and system weaknesses may be underestimated especially for countries with a smaller enrolled cohort than the population numbers. Encouragingly similar work has been completed by Lilensteina (2018) recently focusing on six Francophone African countries using PASEC (Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems of CONFEMEN countries), namely, Benin, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Togo. While it does not provide us with a causal link between early outcomes and adult outcomes, it provides compelling evidence that reflects on the need to consider learning levels before grade 6. Finally, participation in regional assessments such as SEACMEQ and PASEC provides a distinct level of comparability and benchmarking that is strengthened by agreement of an appropriate level of learning and competencies expected which may be more in line with international standards such as those envisaged in the SDGs.

Be careful, real change takes time

Generally, research in developing countries, including South Africa, has focused on diagnosing challenges in early grade literacy and numeracy, with less attention to interventions tested rigorously to provide substance to the call to prioritize FLN. In a book on education inequality, Taylor (2019) argues for the importance of using experimental research to identify and test effective interventions, especially in FLN. An instructive conclusion for the question at hand is that change takes

time. While education stakeholders rightly desire to transform learning, change is often incremental. This is often learnt through the careful theory of change necessary when designing interventions for rigorous experiments as well as when considering effect sizes from evaluation data.

Gustafsson (2020) confirms the reality of steady progress as the informed expectation instead of rapid changes, arguing that there are "speed limits" to meaningful change in foundational skills. These are based on the best improvement rates observed from developing countries using international assessment results over time. This work was commission by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to inform SDG 4 scenarios. While the main point of my argument is that change takes more time than we would like, the magnitudes of change for developing countries are in fact higher than those for developed countries because there is more room for improvement from a low base than from those performing at the top. In addition, the kinds of changes needed to make improvements at scale in developing countries are often less complex than those needed in countries that are performing closer to a "natural" cognitive skills ceiling.

While technology and improved efficiency may accelerate this, it is prudent to temper expectations on the rate of change. Why is this especially useful? Without a well-estimated expectation by governments or international partners, the impetus to change for the sake of change rather than in a meaningful manner will persist.

What we should focus on now

While there is recognition that change at scale may occur at a more measured pace than what is envisioned by the international targets in the SDGs and other political commitments, there is a growing evidence base providing detailed interventions that have been measured rigorously to shift FLN outcomes. This includes the work of RTI in Kenya and similar work in

South Africa, as summarised in the chapter by Taylor (2019) cited earlier. The dissemination of collaboratively developed guiding notes on the most successful practices, such as the World Bank guiding note on structured pedagogy and the structured pedagogy how-to- guides by RTI International, mark an important creation of a shared understanding and approach in concrete ways for FLN support at scale. The bend of international organisations, funders, and other global players should now be on supporting the implementation of these programmes and linking funding and support to this. This would be an elevation of the best collective knowledge to date.

Amidst the recognition of the move towards international convergence on the kinds of FLN support necessary for developing countries, Girin's emphasis on monitoring and accountability for outcomes should not be lost. Most international and regional assessments (such as the Progress in Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS), Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and SEACMEQ) take place beyond the foundation grades. While important, efforts to strengthen early monitoring and to value the outcomes as much as university outcomes is important political and societal work that is yet to be completed. Secondly, many more developing countries participate in regional assessments—15 East and Southern African countries in SEACMEQ and 13 East African countries in PASEC—than in international assessments. There are only three African countries and fewer than 10 developing countries participating in PIRLS. This is similar in the case of TIMSS, although there are slightly more African and developing countries included. It seems, then, that if we are serious about a shared measurement of literacy and numeracy in primary schooling and even for FLN, we need to use the resources, skills, and support of international organisations and partners to address barriers of access for developing countries in international assessments, as well as supporting the continued development and analysis of existing regional assessments.

Table 1. SEACMEQ score and ranking compared to Access to Literacy and Access to Numeracy score and ranking

SACMEQ Reading score		SEACMEQ Mathematics		Overall Country Ranking SEACMEQ	Country Name	Access to Numeracy Ranking	Access to Numeracy Rate for 19–23-year-olds	Access to Literacy Ranking	Access to Literacy Rate for 19–23-year-olds
2000	2007	2000	2007						
536	574	585	623	1	Mauritius		-		-
547	543	563	557	2	Kenya	2	77	2	80
546	578	522	553	3	Tanzania	4	64	5	72
582	575	554	551	4	Seychelles		-		-
529	549	517	541	5	Swaziland	1	80	1	86
521	535	513	521	6	Botswana		-		-
504	508	**	520	7	Zimbabwe	3	70	3	78
492	495	486	495	8	South Africa	5	57	6	69
478	534	478	486	9	Zanzibar		-		-
516	476	530	484	10	Mozambique		36	9	42
482	479	506	482	11	Uganda	7	42	8	55
451	468	447	477	12	Lesotho	6	45	7	61
449	497	431	471	13	Namibia	6	45	4	74
429	434	433	447	14	Malawi	8	25	11	40
440	434	435	435	15	Zambia	9	24	10	41

Source: own compilation based on SEAQMEC II and III and Spaull, N., Taylor, S., (2015). Access to what? Creating a composite measure of educational quantity and educational quality for 11 African countries. Comparative Education Review. Vol. 58, No. 1 using DHS, MICS (for Swaziland) and GHS (for South Africa)

Start with the Right Foot: Recognizing the Power of Foundational Learning Data

*Silvia Montoya, **Director, UNESCO Institute for Statistics***

A child's first steps are always the most difficult. As children begin to acquire the coordination needed between their two feet, the fact that the two feet each have the same name, foot and foot, makes it difficult to explain that you must not raise "*the foot and the foot at the same time.*"[1] In his short story "Instructions for Climbing a Staircase" Julio Cortazar used 381 words to describe what many of us would do using no more than 20 words, proving how difficult is to give instructions for an action that most adults perform unconsciously. As Cortazar did in his essay, Girin Beeharry calls for building on the foundational stages as the key to success, asking us to follow a long set of instructions to reach a successful ending.

In my view, this effort will only succeed after national, regional, and global stakeholders in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) enhance their cooperation; only then will it be possible to eliminate data gaps, monitor national learning levels, and monitor the implementation of missions responding to the review of progress on learning outcomes. Regular progress monitoring through the use of data will be the linchpin of reform. Regular monitoring will lead to the development of education initiatives based on data and help identify where investment is needed. Comparative data on progress to improve learning levels could lead to higher-quality policy dialogue and resource pledges and disbursements.

In this essay, I focus on the relevance of data, the factors that hinder data availability, and the needed actions and principles that can move us forward.

Good quality education data is critical to improve education outcomes

Since 2015, the SDG 4 monitoring framework, with its global and thematic indicators, has helped set a measurement agenda in education that includes the measurement of foundational learning through indicator 4.1.1. However, institutional capacity and financial constraints, related to, and partially caused by, insufficient demand-side pressure has meant that the international community (and more specifically, countries themselves) still lack a complete set of frequent data points from all countries to monitor levels or learning and trends. Ensuring such data are available would help set and, more importantly, track benchmarks to better assess progress on key policy areas.

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1. The first steps are always the most difficult ones to go through, until the coordination needed is acquired. The coincidence between the foot and the foot makes it difficult to explain. Be especially careful not to lift the foot and the foot at the same time", Julio Cortázar, Instrucciones para subir una escalera.)

Data on learning outcomes enables education leaders to understand which learners are making progress, which are not, and why. At the global level, learning outcomes data helps **identify global trends, assist countries, and drive mutual accountability**. Unfortunately, policymakers in the least developed countries often do not have access the right data.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates these issues. At its peak, the pandemic impacted an estimated 1.5 billion learners and over 63 million teachers,[2] and led to the cancellation or postponement of numerous tests or assessments, with a quarter of low- and lower-middle-income countries not tracking children's learning at all in 2020.

Any solution to the data crisis should aim to support countries' student assessment systems that to produce regular and comparable data for early primary, end-of-primary, and end-of-lower-secondary learning. Such data is required to enable policymakers to develop evidence-based policies to improve teaching and learning; to ensure reporting on SDG 4.1.1, with an initial focus on SDG 4.1.1 (a), (b), and (c);[3] and to help monitor voluntarily-set national benchmarks. This objective will be achieved through the following activities:

- Strengthening national learning assessments, as well as related analysis and reporting frameworks, and supporting participation in cross-national assessments
- Strengthening capacity and capabilities in countries to design and implement learning assessments as well as to analyze and use the generated assessment data
- Improving coordination, oversight, and transparency of global efforts to use resources efficiently and effectively in supporting countries, notably by developing a coordinated plan for learning assessment data collection; "brokering" between countries, donors, and providers; and robust monitoring

and evaluation with a focus on both data availability and national capacity development. Capacity-development efforts should fund the establishment of national evaluation agencies and training people abroad.

As Girin's paper rightly points out, one crucial factor often forgotten is that these activities have to be tightly coordinated or have at least one point of very senior-level contact with activities aimed at *improving* learning outcomes (and improvement on other indicators, although those are to some degree already somewhat coordinated, e.g., through the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Board).

Failures in the learning assessment market

Data for learning outcomes indicators are provided via a market[4] that includes data producers; data consumers (countries, policymakers, international agencies, and researchers); and goods and services exchanged for money (prices) to produce the learning outcome data. However, not only are all the conditions required for a market to function violated in the market for learning assessments, but some market characteristics are diametrically opposed to those needed for efficient and equitable functioning, leading to actions that are always implemented in the presence of market failures. Rules for a well-functioning market are listed below, along with explanations about how the data market violates or complies with those rules.

1. There are many producers and consumers competing with each other over the same uniform and undifferentiated product

But with learning assessments, there is product differentiation. In fact, no important "product" sold in the

2. http://uis.unesco.org/en/news/unesco-unicef-world-bank-survey-national-education-responses-covid-19-school-closures-key-0
3. a) refers to learners in grades 2 or 3, b) to learners at the end of primary, and c) to learners at the end of lower secondary.
4. Wikipedia, for example, characterizes markets as institutions that "facilitate trade and enable the distribution and resource allocation in a society. Markets allow any trade-able item to be evaluated and priced. A market emerges more or less spontaneously or may be constructed deliberately by human interaction in order to enable the exchange … of services and goods."

learning assessment market is the same as any other; some assessments are about skills needed for the labor market, others are curriculum-based; some are designed for primary education, others focus on lower secondary; some are citizen-led, others are government-led. And so on.

2. Consumers have all the information they need about the products, including details on how they are produced (in economists' jargon, there is no asymmetry of information)

The current lack of information means that countries must do their own analysis to evaluate the options. At a minimum, they need to understand how international assessments can be used to support the national agenda, to report on the SDGs, and to help their ministries make management decisions.

Finding the right fit can be difficult, which is why they need better guidance. For example, a country might be thinking about participating in a costly international assessment, even though it has a national assessment covering the same education level. To evaluate its options, a country needs to compare the overall costs and benefits of the decision, as well as more technical information to decide on the nitty gritty questions such as items and constructs. As with any expensive product, countries need a tool that allows them to compare the options by providing accurate and objective information.

3. The production techniques are known to all and can be copied

One would expect that with 25 years of intensive experience of preparing cross-national assessments, it would be straightforward to copy this process. Nobody argues that absolutely all information should be in the public domain, as it is important to ensure assessments are valid and keep certain aspects confidential. But the process of producing assessments, and the background

knowledge needed, has been sufficiently standardized that the current high costs are not justified.

4. There is no price discrimination and prices are transparent and uniform

In the current data market, consumers often must haggle, like at a roadside vegetable stall, rather than choose their products at a market with prices clearly posted. While the haggling can lead to better prices for some, there tend to be hidden expenses and higher transactions costs, and maybe higher prices for others. We are all for negotiations, but they should be based on transparent pricing information.

In the learning assessment market there is price discrimination, but not in a positive-equity based way that can lead to better prices for the poorest countries. There is some negotiation on price and different levels of subsidies, and there is also intermediation. Prices in many cases are negotiated between third party payers (e.g., development partners) and the producer.

An official body could produce accurate, comprehensive, and up-to-date information on the current costs of assessments, while documenting steps or conditions that can help countries negotiate. And some of the information is actually contradictory. For example, countries are often led to believe that by joining an international assessment they will benefit from economies of scale. Yet why is it that the fees never seem to go down as the pool of participants grows?

5. There are no significant economies of scale or barriers to entry

In the learning assessment market, there are significant barriers to entry for possible competitors because it is costly to build a set of good learning assessment questions. New providers typically emerge only to provide a differentiated product. For example, there are assessments serving different *geographies* (such as initiatives in East Asia) or offering different ways of *administering and engaging* with the community (*citizen-led*

assessments) as well as different education levels (e.g., the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a higher education standardized test in the United States).

Shaping the learning assessment market

When markets are inefficient, there is a "market failure" that can justify public or collective action. One possibility is the takeover of those functions by someone else. Another approach is "market-shaping": the public sector can induce markets to be more efficient. Tools for shaping the market include:

1. Produce a consumer guide on the different types of assessments

One objective is to systematize market information by **publicizing more information for users** about which assessment is fit for their purpose, what is a reasonable price to pay, and so on. Various public agencies, such as the World Bank and UNESCO's Institute for Statistics (UIS) have published such guides. More could be done, especially regarding price information and the dissemination of this knowledge. UIS, the World Bank, and other institutions have already taken some steps forward, and there have been open discussions through the Global Alliance to Monitor Learning and the Technical Cooperation Group.

Pricing information should, at a minimum, include the fees paid to the international assessment organization; opportunity costs of the technical knowledge required within national agencies; financial costs of field deployment; and the opportunity costs of field deployment if existing staff are used.

The second objective of a consumer guide **is to provide more transparent price information about the cost of participation in cross-national assessments**. Pricing information should at a minimum include the fees paid to the international assessment organization; the opportunity costs of the technical knowledge required

within national agencies; the financial costs of field deployment; and the opportunity costs of field deployment if existing staff are used.

2. Develop methodologies to link national assessments to a global minimum proficiency level for global reporting

If countries and development agencies knew more about how one assessment "translates" into another, they would not feel the same pressure to "buy" every possible test in addition to their own national assessment. Countries can better evaluate the options and their relevance to policymaking if they can see the level at which an assessment is linked to a global yardstick. If one knows how to translate meters into yards, one does not need two measuring sticks. This information will also help to boost the technical skills of national staff while also supporting development partners that fund assessments as part of their contribution to SDG 4.

The UIS, through the Global Alliance to Monitor Learning, has worked intensively over the last five years to develop tools and linking strategies to allow reporting that uses all available sources of information. This has led to the definition of Minimum Proficiency Levels, the development of a Global Proficiency Framework (reading and mathematics), a Linking Strategy Portfolio based on a student-based linking through the Rosetta-Stone project, the Policy Linking Methodology to align national assessments, and, currently, the SDG4 test developed within the Monitoring Impact on Learning Outcomes project in Africa. An interim reporting strategy to increase reporting during the development phase, a Protocol for Reporting, and a detailed metadata complete the support to countries reporting. The UIS has also produced a proposal to report a standardized measure for SDG4 in 2017 that was used to estimate the number of children not learning and served as a basis for the World Bank Harmonized Learning Outcomes data.

3. Transfer and build knowledge in the Global South through a set of actions to create free information on how to craft a decent assessment, laying out technical policies and procedures for assessments, such as for citizen-led assessments or early-grade assessments.

An item bank of assessment questions that work well, and information on how to put such questions together, might be an example. Item banks can help to build sensible assessments that can be used for international reporting to deal with the technical barriers preventing producers (including countries themselves) from entering the market. One step towards generating capacity in the countries and lowering costs is the use of artificial intelligence applied to a bank of items properly aligned to the different education cycles of countries. The platform would embed a bank of questions with known and tested technical properties. The approach would also suggest ways to combine items in a sound manner, as needed for reporting. Countries would be able to get and contribute items, to build the whole assessment if needed, to run the modeling that produces the results without having to commit themselves to packages where their ownership and voice is reduced. A machine learning engine would, in an ambitious scenario, allow adaptive testing at low cost. Similarly, one way forward would be to develop a pool of items from existing assessments, as a free global public good that would empower national authorities to develop their own assessments. The item bank and associated software tools could help new providers, or countries who would self-provide, similar to how the global community has helped generic drug manufacturers develop products.

Is the learning assessment market equitable?

A market can have a major equity problem and still not be considered a failure. **A market may simply not work for those without purchasing power**. The problem with the learning assessment market is that *all* the

conditions are violated and some characteristics are the diametrical opposite of those needed for efficient and equitable markets.

To make the learning assessment market more equitable, international education stakeholder may want to consider:

1. Make available resources to participate in cross-national assessments, and develop national capacities that are allocated unequally, transferring purchasing power to those who need it, either because they are very poor or simply because they need the behavioral nudge. But such subsidy mechanisms must be transparent, explicit, and designed carefully.

2. Transfer purchasing power and technical skills to countries. Assessment costs are high, relative to other discretionary quality assurance mechanisms, for poorer countries. They may need subsidies either to cover the cost of both participation and technical skills development, or as a behavioral nudge. As the price of cross-national assessments becomes standardized and transparent, international agencies should ensure grants are made available to countries with a long-term perspective, to ensure all countries benefit equally according to their need. The design of such a scheme is non-trivial and needs to be thought about carefully so as not to create further inequalities or perverse incentives (e.g., pretend to a lack of interest so as to merit the behavioral nudge).

3. Increased transparency of donor's investment to improve the availability, reliability, and quality of learning assessments. Efforts by donors are undermined by the lack of transparency, coordination, or readily available data on donor support to these areas. As a result, the is no clarity about the value of donor support for learning assessments. Specifically, there is no readily available, up-to-date, or reliable data on the scale, focus, or direction of donor funding. This situation presents four main challenges to the global education community:

- There is no understanding of the **full extent of donor support to the learning assessment agenda**, at global, country, or donor levels
- There is no identification of the **existing gaps** (either thematic or financial) in support
- **There is a lack of coordination of support across donors and countries leading to** duplication, inefficiencies, or increase in country's burden.

To resolve these challenges, UNESCO UIS and the World Bank have partnered in a Virtual Register for donor financing of learning assessments. The coordination in funding and new investments would function as a virtual fund where funding pledges and disbursements, as well as technical pledges, are brokered, coordinated, and tracked so that there is accountability. It is expected that funders would continue to provide support, and recipients continue to receive support, but in a more efficient, increased, intentional, and coordinated manner. It is estimated that this initiative would require about $259 million over the 10-year period from 2020 to 2030. This equates to an estimated $182 million more than if current estimated donor spending was maintained during this 10-year period (approx. $77 million). Given the significant lack of available financial data from donors and assessment providers, this costing is based on high-level estimates, built on initial assumptions and best-available data.

Towards a country-led, transparent, and efficient way

The discussion above is an important one for anyone working on SDG 4. The global desire to make progress on learning, and not just access, is a central pillar but may also have, perhaps unwillingly, contributed to the market we find ourselves with today. But markets don't care about justice or equality; they are rarely set up to work for those without purchasing power. Something must be done, therefore, to level the playing field and the needed actions demands cooperation and duties from every actor if we do not want to repeat the same discussion of why we lack the basic inputs to achieve the outcomes.

Why Do We Keep Failing to Universalize Literacy?

Karen Mundy, Professor, Educational Leadership and Policy, OISE and Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto

Recent studies point to a sorrowful reality: in many lower-income countries, children, even those accessing a full cycle of primary schooling, often enter young adulthood with limited literacy and numeracy. Yet for more than 30 years—even longer, if one considers the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—the global community has rededicated its efforts every 10 years or so to a world in which illiteracy is eradicated and all children and youth have access to good quality, public education. This, in essence, is the call for "education for all."

Girin Beeharry's 2021 essay in the *International Journal of Educational Development* is a laudable effort to hold the global community to account for this failure. Building on Nicolas Burnett's analysis of deficiencies in the global educational aid architecture, Girin highlights lack of leadership, prioritization, and accountability among global actors. He calls upon global actors to reorient their work around the challenge of what he terms "foundational learning" and sets specific challenges for key actors, including UNESCO, the World Bank, the Global Partnership for Education, civil society, and policymakers in low-income countries.
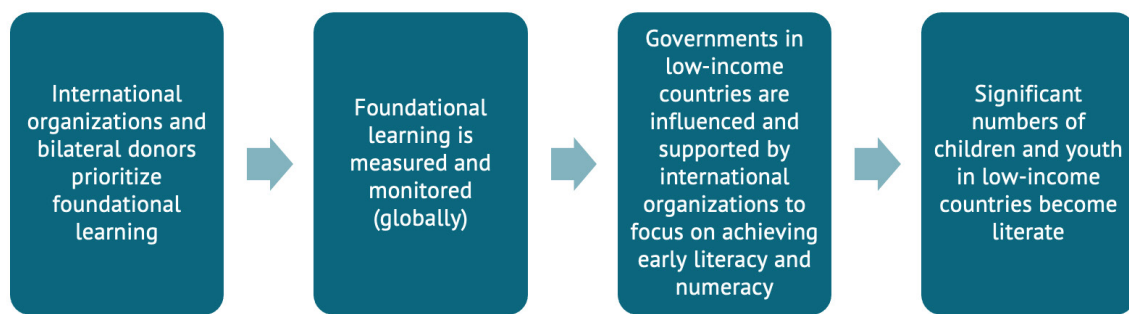
While applauding and supporting Girin's call for ambitious, scaled-up global focus on childhood literacy and numeracy, this rejoinder challenges some aspects of his analysis and the imputed theory of change that underpins it. It concludes, somewhat mischievously, with brief review and call to action addressed to the Gates' Foundations itself.

Unpacking and questioning Girin's imputed theory of change

Girin lays out the underlying failures in global governance and our puzzling lack of progress on childhood literacy with elegance and conviction.

As I read his piece, I found myself increasingly skeptical about whether the actors and actions he calls for are likely to contribute to universalizing childhood literacy. One way to unpack this is to examine the (imputed) theory of change that underpins Girin's article. Propositionally, it looks something like this:

Figure 6.

International organizations and bilateral donors prioritize foundational learning → Foundational learning is measured and monitored (globally) → Governments in low-income countries are influenced and supported by international organizations to focus on achieving early literacy and numeracy → Significant numbers of children and youth in low-income countries become literate

Why my skepticism? First, history suggests that international organizations are rarely first movers when it comes to changing values or mental models among governments. Though they can help consolidate and spread new policy movements, they are rarely the progenitors of major innovations or capacity within public systems, especially when it comes to programs that aim towards the redistribution of benefits.

As Girin shows, the toolkits of international organizations are modest, comprised of technical assistance, limited amounts of finance, aggregation and dissemination of knowledge and best practice, creation of metrics, and formalization of routines for intergovernmental monitoring and accountability.

Furthermore, Girin concludes that what international organizations produce, in terms of knowledge, is often not wanted or adopted by low-income country clients. Thus he notes that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is pulling back from this type of investment because "there is little [national level] demand for these global goods." He gives equality poor ratings to international organizations in the areas of advocacy, financing, and accountability for their own performance.

Girin is without doubt an apt critic of the international architecture. But why then place so much emphasis on the potential of a coalition of global level, intergovernmental actors to play a catalytic role in strengthening national political will and action? Girin himself has noted that were he to rewrite his essay, he would start

at the country level; and he has raised other concerns and insights in a lively podcast.

Creating a coalition for global change

Perhaps I am too cynical, but based on anecdotal observations, and reinforced in recent research on international norm dynamics, I suspect that a global governance regime that is primarily focused on production and dissemination of "best practices" and "what works" evidence, that emphasizes the use of global metrics and performance-based financing, is more likely to lead to greater gaming and externalization of education reform goals and agendas than to the construction of a broad-based coalition for childhood literacy and numeracy.

Yet we know from much research that broad-based coalitions play an essential role in changing global norms, and values—especially in areas, like education, where pre-existing interests create resistance. From the abolition of slavery and the spread of female suffrage, to more recent examples in the health sector (effective response to HIV/AIDS), and around climate justice, transnational advocacy movements that bring together country-level and international civil society actors are credited with spurring large-scale social change.

Here we face a conundrum. The strongest members of education's transnational civil society—international bodies representing teachers, and some of the largest

(but not all) international NGOs and several influential foundations—are profoundly uncomfortable with the framing of the literacy challenge as Girin and key global actors lay it out.

Education's civil society sees the focus on metrics and accountability as remote from the everyday worlds of schools and classrooms. Worse: two decades of metric and incentive-heavy policy reform across OECD countries (including in the US, where the Gates Foundation played a pivotal role), has led education's civil society to distrust such instruments and their mechanical use in school improvement. Foundational learning, from this perspective, is at best a truncated image of the vibrant, joyful, empowering, and equitable educational systems that education's civil society feels are needed.

My hunch is that we won't make terrific progress on childhood literacy—and learning equality—without forming common cause with education's civil society, and especially the organizations representing educators themselves. These actors are essential carriers of the public mission of education, with a long history of pushing international and national policymakers towards an embrace of literacy as a right and a building block of empowered citizenship.

Poor policies or a failure of implementation?

External actors, whether through technical support or financial incentives, are generally pictured in Girin's essay as helpful where governments are making poor policy choices (and assuming that international organizations agree to truly prioritize childhood literacy in their own portfolios).

Yet many would debate whether it is poor policy choices (lack of focus) or poor implementation that lies at the crux of the childhood literacy challenge faced in lower-income countries. If the problem is implementation—"the process of making something active or effective"—then our theory of change and the role of international actors needs to be very different from the one implicit in Girin's article.

I am far from the first to call for the need to move away from what Aiyar and Bhattacharya (2016) call the "post office state"—where governmental officials are primarily used for transmitting orders downwards and data upwards. A key question for our time is how to support innovative and adaptive potential within existing education systems—unlocking the creativity and problem-solving agency of educators, policymakers, and the organizations that support them. My hunch is that we (the international community) needs to dig deeper to understand the role of what Honig calls mission-oriented behaviour in the public sector, while moving away from our focus on compliance-oriented mechanisms.

To do so, external actors will need to offer something that is very different from their current technical assistance and capacity-building activities. My personal observation of the behaviours of international organizations and their knowledge production and diffusion strategies points to an ongoing tendency towards externalizing knowledge, evidence and accountability. Data that is intended to support accountability is channelled away from the actors and systems we expect to solve challenges and implement change, towards global organizations who are rarely involved or accountability for actual implementation.

Unfortunately, I see too little in Girin's argument and in the Gates Foundation's present portfolio that addresses this fundamental challenge regarding the role of international organizations in achieving universal childhood literacy and numeracy.

The Gates Foundation as a global education policy actor

Readers of Girin's article will likely have many questions about the current and future role of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as a global education policy actor. Such questions are particularly pertinent because of the increasingly significant roles that foundations play in global governance (as discussed in my recent essay), where their legitimacy and influence as

boundary spanners and norm entrepreneurs is both appreciated and frequently debated. (Full disclosure: in my position at the University of Toronto, I've been the recipient of a research grant from the Gates Foundation and have undertaken contracted research for the foundation.)

I know from conversations with Gates Foundation staff that the foundation is still "dipping its toes" into global education. The small size of its global education funding has in part led to a grant portfolio focused on investments in well-established global level evidence and policy aggregators, almost all based in the Western world—thus the World Bank, rich-country think tanks, and universities are among its largest grantees. The portfolio leans heavily on the development of global metrics, assessments, and evidence, though more recently, investments suggest a welcome shift of funding to organizations in the global South.

It is surprising to see that the foundation's global education portfolio does not yet seem to have learned lessons from its US/domestic education portfolio, which has shifted from an unsuccessful focus on top-down policy levers to a more incremental, coalition-building approach anchored in support for localized school improvement networks with equity-focused missions. Nor has it incorporated grant-making for transnational civil society advocacy, long a hallmark of its global health portfolio.

An Invitation to the Gates Foundation

I have argued that we are facing two daunting global failures to address childhood literacy and numeracy: (1) a failure of policy framing and coalition building; and (2) a failure of finding the right way to support mission-oriented capability at national and regional levels among lower-income countries.

Inspired by recent work by Honig and Mazzucato, we must aspire to an approach that builds from country-level capability up, rather than from global norms, evidence, and knowledge down. An approach that starts from globally generated metrics, incentives, and diffusion of global goods is unlikely bring the important changes in universal childhood literacy and numeracy to which Beeharry aspires.

My invitation to the Gates Foundation is to take these ideas seriously; to think more deeply about how to use its reputation and resources to support a more broadly-based form of global collective action; and to explore how international organizations can better support capacity for mission-oriented public sectors in education in lower income countries. Too much in the foundation's current playbook reinforces what we know are failing features of the global education architecture, and pays too little attention to coalition building, national ownership, and capacity – all important ingredients of any global solution for the crisis in childhood literacy and numeracy.

Make Inclusive FLN a Signature Issue for Education Systems

Moses Ngware, Senior Research Scientist, and Head of Education and Youth Empowerment, African Population and Health Research Center, Nairobi, Kenya

Introduction

Girin Beeharry's essay is provocative, thoughtful, and timely, and it makes a case for prioritising foundation literacy and numeracy (FLN) as a way of stalling the learning crisis in low-income countries (LICs) and low-middle-income countries (LMICs). Girin submits that "unless these efforts aim squarely at the problems of prioritization [of FLN], performance monitoring, and accountability, their impact will be minimal at best." This powerful assertion cannot go without reflection from someone who cares about FLN.

Where am I coming from?

The world over, education systems have similar *traditions*—they mainly measure learning by assessment scores in literacy and numeracy, and since such an approach tells us a lot about what is going on in the system, so be it. The word "literacy" elicits memories of adult education programs common in many LICs, and LMICs, but now we also know it is a necessary foundational skill for learning; likewise, numeracy skills prepare children to process quantitative concepts.

In 2016, the World Bank, arguably a force to reckon with in financing education and generating new knowledge, brought to our realisation the presence of a silent crisis – the *learning crisis*.[1] One would be excused for denying this revelation; the Millennium Development Goals agenda had just ended in 2015, implying that their accountability mechanisms failed to pick up on the crisis at an early stage. Fortunately, a new dawn was breaking with the rebooted global goals or Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with their emphasis on indicators to measure progress in FLN. As the old adage goes, creating FLN skills in early life is critical because it empowers children to be independent learners; and in later life it enhances an individual's ability to make informed decisions that lead to better life outcomes.[2] FNL skills are therefore critical as they unleash individuals' potential to benefit more from education, with a caveat here that research on long-term impacts of FLN is still nascent, as Girin explicitly acknowledges.

We do not want to create an impression that FLN matters only in early learning. Available analyses on private and social benefits of education (I mean good education) in later years show positive returns for literacy.

1. Khokhar, T. (2017). A crisis in learning: 9 charts from the 2018 World Development Report. World Bank Blogs. Retrieved from https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/crisis-learning-9-charts-2018-world-development-report; World Bank (2018). World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-1096-1

2. Garcia-Retamero, R., Sobkow, A., Petrova, D., Garrido, D., & Traczyk, J. (2019). Numeracy and risk literacy: What have we learned so far? The Spanish journal of psychology, v22, doi:10.1017/sjp.2019.16 ;World Literacy Foundation (2018). The economic & social cost of illiteracy: A white paper by the World Literacy Foundation. World Literacy Summit, 25th - 27th, March 2018, Oxford, United Kingdom. Retrieved from https://worldliteracyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/TheEconomicSocialCostofIlliteracy-2.pdf

For instance, globally, literate workers earn between 58 percent and 70 percent more than illiterate workers; they are also more likely to have skills to progress in their careers and improve their salary throughout their lifetime—if you like, the economic benefits of literacy.[3] Furthermore, literacy is a key driver of numeracy skills, as seen in several robust studies.[4] If we are to project backwards, it would, therefore, mean that better later life outcomes, including productivity and inclusion that can be linked to development, can be traced in investments in FLN. Hence, FLN is not only about school children but has much wider implications to the life of the communities, especially in LICs and LMICs. In most of these countries, it is easy to see FLN as being limited to children and schools, and in many instances, fail to see the potential long-term wider impacts—a fact that may result in the underinvestment in FLN. One cannot entirely blame the minister, as there is little knowledge on these long-term benefits, further mystifying the matter. I will return to this argument later when expounding on the notion of making FLN a signature issue and an approach to conducting business in education. Girin's essay is, therefore, timely and a strong reminder of what education systems should never drop from their radar if these benefits are to accrue to their communities.

Reflections on Girin's essay

Where I agree with Girin

Girin's essay could not have come at a better time, with many countries globally, including the LICs and LMICs, strategizing on "building back better" after the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning. Girin's position is that to accelerate progress towards achieving SGD 4, and perhaps addressing the learning crisis, countries must prioritise a few things. In his words, this includes making FLN a priority, measuring what we do in education, and holding ourselves accountable for the results.

As an advocate of FLN and their associated pedagogy, and a person who generates evidence in support of effective policies and practices in education, I could not agree more with Girin on the "*what*," for four key reasons.

First, Girin makes a very strong and spirited case for prioritisation, especially of FLN. Even if a country and/or any other actor, especially in LICs and LMICs, were to differ with Girin regarding FLN, they will unreservedly agree on the need for prioritisation. I am convinced of this because systems the world over are known to develop terrific education plans that lay out priority areas. Furthermore, open cheques to implement education plans are non-existent, hence a need to focus on the priority areas. Absence of a priority is a precursor to failure, and even if education systems do not prioritise FLN, at least there should be something they have prioritised.

Second, when we measure processes, outputs, and outcomes, we improve our understanding of the path to success and enhance our chances of victory because we learn and adapt from our own actions. It is, therefore, imperative to follow Girin's advice on performance monitoring. Failure to do so would result in guess work, hunch, rule of the thumb, and subjective experience informing decision-making. If this happens, it wouldn't be surprising to find children who have been left behind in learning or even misallocation of scarce resources, which we want to avoid at all costs.

The **third** reason I find Girin's essay compelling is because of its "human rights" approach to

3. Green, D. A., & Riddell, W. C. (2012). Understanding educational impacts: The role of literacy and numeracy skills. In 11th IZA/SOLE Transatlantic Meeting of Labor Economists. Retrieved from http://conference.iza.org/conference_files/TAM2012/riddell_w5670.pdf; Vignoles, A. (2020). What is the economic value of literacy and numeracy? *IZA World of Labor*, 229(2), doi:10.15185/izawol.229.v2; Winters, J. V. (2018). Do higher levels of education and skills in an area benefit wider society? *IZA World of Labor*, 130(2), doi:10.15185/izawol.130.v2

4. Bohlmann, C., & Pretorius, E. (2008). Relationships between mathematics and literacy: Exploring some underlying factors. *Pythagoras*, 2008(1), 42-55. doi.org/10.4102/pythagoras.v0i67.73; Korpipää, H., Koponen, T., Aro, M., Tolvanen, A., Aunola, K., Poikkeus, A. M., ... & Nurmi, J. E. (2017). Covariation between reading and arithmetic skills from Grade 1 to Grade 7. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 51, 131-140; Rutherford-Becker, K. J., & Vanderwood, M. L. (2009). Evaluation of the relationship between literacy and mathematics skills as assessed by curriculum-based measures. The California School Psychologist, 14(1), 23-34. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ878358.pdf

development that advocates for the need to hold duty bearers accountable for the outcomes—the buck stops with someone. In particular, various positions and different levels of offices should be held accountable for implementing various activities whose sum effect is improving FLN skills. Accountability improves a systems performance[5] and it would be beneficial in stalling the learning crisis, but such accountability could be more effective if there exist explicit feedback loops that are professionally anchored on trust.[6]

Lastly, the recommendations target key stakeholders with interest and responsibility for improving learning, ranging from LICs to development partners and civil society organisation. In each group or individual stakeholders, the essay makes very explicit "asks" that can be taken up and implemented. This way, "key persons of interest" in stalling the learning crisis have practical take-home messages from the essay.

My areas of departure from the essay

In the above, I have taken an optimistic view of Girin's essay. I now want to look at the other side of the coin without being pessimistic, and perhaps offer some perspectives and some caveats. To start with, Girin's essay comes out as presenting the "*what*." While this is important, and we should all know what we want to do, the struggle is in the "*how*" to improve FLN. LICs and LMICs have long espoused quality, inclusivity in learning, and early learning; what they are now struggling with is the best strategies to make this happen in the context of education systems let down by the structural rigidity of their sub-systems. For instance, Girin uses Kenya as an example of an LMIC that has prioritised

FLN. Kenya demonstrates the strength of using existing government systems to implement reforms in education—somehow moving away from piloting projects through NGOs to piloting and scale up through government system, and also somehow overcoming structural barriers.[7] This approach presents important lessons for reversing the learning crisis.

Equally important, though not so explicit in Girin's essay, is the various political economy contexts in developing countries. In most LICs and LMICs, their political systems are very dynamic and sometimes turbulent, but key reform decisions are mainly centralised and sometimes used to seek elective positions for competing political interests.[8] The essay provides an example from India, where inclusion of FLN did not come from electoral demand but from the conviction of bureaucrats—my player is this should continue even after the bureaucrats exit their current official positions. In fact, Mitchell and Mitchell once said that "policymakers are tempted to adopt inconsistent and even incoherent policies trying to placate all important constituency groups."[9] The buy-in by political leadership is critical if FLN or elements that could enhance FLN are to be prioritised and receive the much-needed domestic budget support. Furthermore, as I argued earlier, entrenching FLN in the education system should be a goal and a strategy to reverse the learning crisis. Such entrenchment and budgetary allocation requires political good will. Fortunately, there are many countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, that have reformed, or are reforming or plan to reform their education systems, even before the pandemic struck. This provides an entry point for entrenching the FLN into the system

5. Francis, D. R. (2016). School accountability raises educational performance. Retrieved from https://www.nber.org/digest/feb05/school-accountability-raises-educational-performance; Smith, W. C., & Benavot, A. (2019). Improving accountability in education: the importance of structured democratic voice. Asia Pacific Education Review, 20(2), 193-205. Retrieved from https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12564-019-09599-9

6. Crouch, L. (2020). Systems Implications for Core Instructional Support Lessons from Sobral (Brazil), Puebla (Mexico), and Kenya. Rise Insight Note. Retrieved from https://riseprogramme.org/publications/systems-implications-core-instructional-support-lessons-sobral-brazil-puebla-mexico

7. Piper, B., DeStefano, J., Kinyanjui, E. M., & Ong'ele, S. (2018). Scaling up successfully: Lessons from Kenya's Tusome national literacy program. Journal of Educational Change, 19(3), 293-321. Retrieved from https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10833-018-9325-4; Stern, J., Jukes, M. & Piper, B. (2020). Is It Possible to Improve Learning at Scale? Reflections on the Process of Identifying Large-Scale Successful Education Interventions. CGD Blogs Posts. Retrieved from https://www.cgdev.org/blog/it-possible-improve-learning-scale-reflections-process-identifying-large-scale-successful

8. Kingdon, G. G., Little, A., Aslam, M., Rawal, S., Moe, T., Patrinos, H., ... & Sharma, S. K. (2014). A rigorous review of the political economy of education systems in developing countries. Final Report. Education Rigorous Literature Review. Department for International Development (UK).

9. Mitchell, D. E., & Mitchell, R. E. (2003). The political economy of education policy: The case of class size reduction. Peabody Journal of Education, 78(4), 120-152. doi:10.1207/S15327930PJE7804_07

if political will is supportive and if structural rigidities are dealt with, a priori.

At the risk of sounding pessimistic, how do I convince myself that if LICs and LMICs prioritise FLN, measurement, and accountability, this time round the results will be different? I think getting it right is more complicated, though Girin's essay provides a good starting or entry point. I anchor my argument of this complexity on two assertions. First: "Deep-seated and long-standing structural faults that run through many education systems, such as large class sizes, low levels of teacher competence and motivation, and books in the wrong language, are frequently ignored in the process of curriculum reform" (Cunningham, 2018, p1)[10]. Second, "One reason education systems struggle to address the learning crisis is that the quality of the sub-systems (curricular design and lesson plans, textbook design, assessment tools, and teacher coaching and support) is often low, and in some cases missing altogether. Just as importantly, though, the coherence among these 'core' sub-systems is often missing."[11] These issues will stand in the way of prioritisation, measurement, and accountability – and perhaps they equally deserve to be fixed, a priori.

My other point borrows from two of the three dimensions of the learning crisis as documented in the World Development Report.[12] The two happen to be interrelated and include the immediate causes, and the deeper system causes. Addressing the immediate causes is akin to going for the much-talked-about low-hanging fruits, such as strengthen early childhood education to make children ready to enter primary school, teacher school-based and classroom-based mentorship support, eliminate input leakages so that children and teachers can access instructional materials, and the wider education governance issues. Never mind these are the same sub-systems that create complexity in the education system. In the longer term, the education system will need to reboot its structural formation, as I suggested above.

Lastly, one would be forgiven for insinuating that Girin is too hard on the GPE board—it sounds like he is saying "the buck stops with you." While GPE and other players in the education sector have a major role to play in addressing the learning crisis, each has limitations, known and unknown. Furthermore, some of the players—such as the World Bank, USAID, and FCDO (the part that was formerly DFID)—have been in this space long before the GPE and its predecessor came into being; they also existed long before some of the LICs and LMICs got their political independence. Given the dynamics of the funding sources such as pool funding and basket funding, and perhaps related national interests from the fund source, I would look at this as a shared responsibility, but as would be expected, some global institutions and ministries of education in LICs and LMICs should lead from the front.

Conclusion

The question remains: What is the best solution to the learning crisis? My quick response to this self-formulated and rhetorical inquiry is there is no magic bullet to fix the crisis, but there are several innovative ways that LICs and LMICs can adapt to arrest and perhaps reverse the crisis. One of them is FLN and Girin makes a strong case for it.

That said, I would make three proposals by way of both conclusions and recommendations. First, there is no harm in trying different innovations that could help countries understand the "how" to improve learning. Innovations could be interventions, strategies, policies, practices, dismantling structural rigidities, decisions among others. However, such innovations should be piloted and/or scaled within the existing government or ministerial systems. Failure to embed

10. Cunningham, R. (20018). Busy Going Nowhere: Curriculum Reform in Eastern and Southern Africa. UNICEF Think Piece Series. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/esa/sites/unicef.org.esa/files/2018-10/EducationThinkPieces_5_CurriculumReform.pdf

11. Crouch, L. (2020). Systems Implications for Core Instructional Support Lessons from Sobral (Brazil), Puebla (Mexico), and Kenya. Rise Insight Note, p. 2. Retrieved from https://riseprogramme.org/publications/systems-implications-core-instructional-support-lessons-sobral-brazil-puebla-mexico

12. World Bank (2018). World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-1096-1

this within such systems is simply flogging a dead horse, and I mean a dead horse. That said, it is important to appreciate the challenges of working within a bureaucratic system, but for sustainability, I do believe this is what is needed. In any case, one cannot run away from adaptive management when dealing with a crisis of this magnitude.

So, what should we run away from if we are to reverse the path the crisis has taken? In my second proposal, other than proof of principle, stakeholders with a reform mindset should run away from standalone project model of implementation that is usually common with us who are in the NGO/CSO sector, to piloting and scaling within the ministries of education systems. I hear some people say that it can be painful because of the style of doing things but it might enhance sustainability, ownership, strengthen capacity of practitioners and education managers, and at the end, scale

up elements of an intervention that could start reversing the learning crisis. In other words, pull away interventions from a project model to a system model.

Finally, FLN can and should be viewed as a signature issue in education around which other things could be anchored. For instance, we can hold various positions and offices accountable through demonstrating how well they have improved FLN skills and competences; budgets can be allocated based on projected improvements in FLN skills and competences; teaching and learning materials in various subjects can be developed to respond to FLN needs; teacher professional development programs can be taken close to the classrooms and reformed to speak to FLN. This way, and as a signature issue, FLN becomes institutionalised and an approach and/or a reference point of organising programs, reforming structural rigidities, and measuring success in education.

The Missing Middle: What the Emphasis on National Education Results Ignores

Dr. Benjamin Piper, Senior Director, Africa Education, RTI International; Non-Resident Fellow, Center for Global Development

Girindre Beeharry's essay calls for increased reporting of learning outcomes data at the national level. This goal may be difficult to attain across the Global South, but even if it were easy, it would be insufficient to improve learning outcomes. What matters will be getting the data into the hands of midlevel civil servants. This essay is a call for the international education aid infrastructure to stop ignoring the midlevel and to experiment with easily accessible methods—such as interactive dashboards—to support behavior change at the midlevel. National averages alone will not affect the behavior of the middle level civil servants, at least not in most countries in which I have worked. The availability of average learning outcomes data that allow countries to report on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4.1.1a and 4.1.1b[1] obviously is important. My response to Girin, however, is that when the sector collects data on national average learning outcomes, this should become the entry point for a much deeper investment in targeting learning outcomes data to those who can use it. Investing in priority setting, monitoring and accountability at the national level without also providing technical assistance to actually implement the monitoring and accountability at the middle level of the system is misguided. Moreover, the availability of implementation data from foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) programs should lead to a focus on changing the behavior of government officers.

A true story from Kenya

A new cabinet secretary for education stood up for his first address to the subnational education leaders in Kenya. This officer operates in a centralized decision-making system that assigns subnational leaders to support hundreds or thousands of schools. His task is made more complex by the fact that there are parallel structures at the subnational level. Limited by a lack of timely, accurate, and relevant subnational data, he strode to the podium to talk about the need for Kenya to have one education system, one streamlined structure, and a clear focus on national priorities.

Fortunately for the cabinet secretary, Kenya had data on learning outcomes, and those data were not reserved just for reporting beyond his country's borders. This new data set, presented to the gathering by a literacy program director shortly after the keynote address, came from a national program in Kenya that had just recently begun compiling data from coaches supporting teachers implementing the literacy

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1. SDG 4.1.1: "Proportion of children and young people (a) in grades 2–3; (b) at the end of primary; and (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics."

program in schools across the country. Each visit from the coach included data on pedagogical quality and a simple measure of learning outcomes from a handful of children, collected after the lesson was completed.

An interactive dashboard that processed and visually displayed the data to the audience was very simple. It included the percentage of teachers observed by coaches and a coarse measure of literacy outcomes disaggregated by grade; month-by-month data were available to track progress. But because the data could be disaggregated to the subnational level, and the results were available in real time, the cabinet secretary saw an opportunity. He leapt back up to the podium. Asking the FLN program director to display the dashboard again for all to see, he noted the subnational locations with the highest portion of their teachers being observed in classrooms by the coaches. He had the top education officials from the two highest-performing subnational levels stand up, had the rest of Kenya's education leaders applaud them, and called them out by name to celebrate their leadership achievements, namely the focus on improving FLN outcomes. He did not embarrass the education officials from the lowest-performing counties in front of the entire team, but he stated their geographic locations and asked them to do better next time. He ended his remarks by noting that those counties that had positive results with encouraging data should be congratulated for working together to ensure improved learning outcomes, and critically, for managing the time of their lower-level education officials efficiently.

Imagine what happened next. This national cabinet secretary left his initial meeting with his subnational leaders having pointed to the importance of the management roles carried out by lower-level education officers, coaches, and technical staff; reinforced the importance of focusing on learning outcomes; and encouraged these subnational leaders in different portions of the system to work together to accomplish learning improvement goals. Although education management information system programs

have been funded for years in this country, this FLN dashboard collated the only active data he had available at the subnational level. He eventually requested that the literacy data on the dashboard be expanded to include the national-level numeracy results newly obtained through a different program that used a similar instructional model. Subnational leaders began to see the work of managing their staff to make school visits and focus on learning as essential to their work, and critical for what was a priority in government, as indicated by the cabinet secretary.

Support behavior change at the middle level

It is the middle level that matters. Girin points out the need for the international education field to improve the quality and quantity of learning outcomes data at the country level. I would argue that monitoring learning at the national level is not enough. What we want is not to reduce the number of missing cells in the *Global Monitoring Report* and the World Bank *Human Capital Index*. We need the data that are collected to change the behavior of civil servants. I have yet to see a trend of national education leaders consistently using solitary learning outcomes averages to fundamentally change the behavior of their officers. This change happens if the data, their use, and their usability are targeted at the meso or middle level of the system, which is too often ignored in the recent wave of national-scale systems work and classroom focus on improved learning.

Assessment-informed instruction is a term we are using to emphasize the connection between assessments of various types on the one hand, and instructional quality on the other. A variety of country-level and international assessments are increasingly available to the leaders of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Figure 7 draws from a guidance document I recently developed with colleagues to suggest ways to more effectively connect these assessment investments, often externally funded, into the actual decision-making processes of

Figure 7. Assessment levels in the system
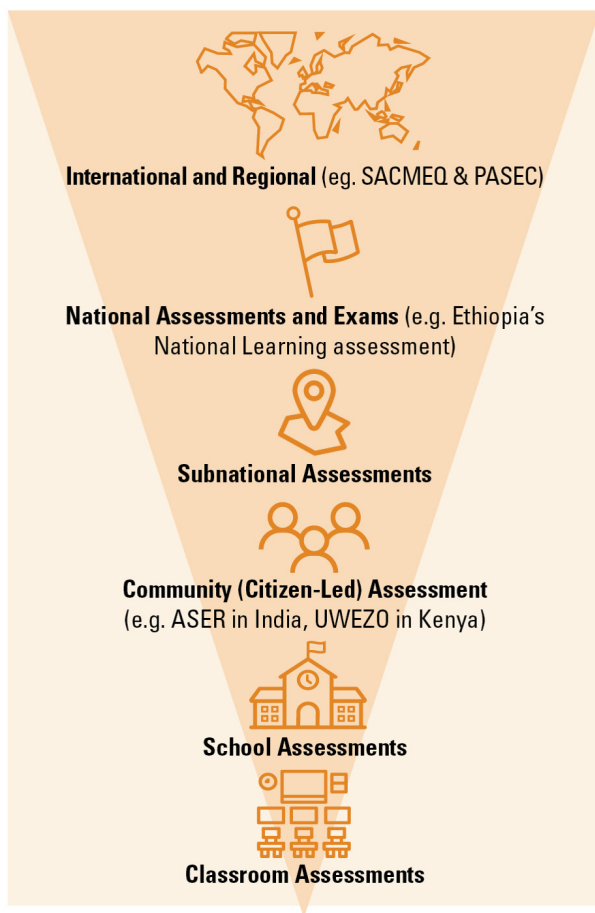
ASER = Annual Status of Education Report; PASEC = Programme d'analyse des systèmes éducatifs de la CONFEMEN [Conférence des ministres de l'Education des états et gouvernements de la francophonie]; SACMEQ = Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality.

Source: Chiappetta et al. (2021).

subnational government structures.[2] I would argue, in fact, that without that linkage between the large-scale assessments and the decision-making, even in—in fact, particularly in—informal decision-making at the middle level, the assessments will have failed to affect instruction meaningfully, if not entirely.

What drives actual behavior is the subnational availability and utilization of data. I will leave it to the broader international education sector to figure out

how to get a mean score into the international and regional reports named in Figure 7. What I am most interested in is creating structures that get data into the hands of that midlevel civil servant at the subnational level.

Improving outcomes requires consistent implementation driven by reliable, regular data

Few ministers have the systems in place to use average learning data from each year or every two years to lead change sufficiently. To do so correctly, these leaders would have to be able to take this average, interpret the key causes for it, and apply that information consistently to their daily mundane decisions, as well as to the many layers of the bureaucracy below them. In many systems in LMICs, this expectation is just not realistic. Ministries of education are highly political, complex institutions that suffer from the malady of the immediate. The end-of-year and end-of-cycle examinations, the scandals, the teachers' unions fights, the fire at the school, the fraudulent teacher certificates, the theft of learning materials—these are the actual inputs that midlevel civil servants use to determine how to spend their marginal hours. The LMICs that I know do not have a clear line of sight between the national average learning outcomes estimates and the behavior of individual educators, let alone a line of sight that would cause these estimates to supersede the beckoning of the immediate and urgent.

Why does this disconnect matter? Improving learning outcomes requires high-quality materials and focused training, certainly. But it also requires consistency—daily teaching of the effective materials. And consistency over a long period of time. It requires the midlevel civil servants to reinforce the message that teaching using the FLN methods is a priority. It requires the midlevel civil servants to encourage and sometimes mandate that local instructional coaches

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2. Chiappetta, M., Piper, B., & Ralaingita, W. (2021). Assessment-informed instruction: System level. A how to guide. Developed by RTI International under the Science of Teaching for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy grant, through funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI International. Available from the authors.

visit classrooms. It demands that these civil servants reinforce the notion that full classroom observations are expected—not just setting foot in a classroom to hear the children sing the entertaining greeting song, but watching the teacher for a full 30- or 40-minute lesson and giving targeted feedback. It requires the message that visiting one classroom is not enough; while you are at the school, observe all three lower primary teachers teaching their lessons, bring them together afterward, and debrief on lesson quality and areas for improvement.

It's the midlevel civil servant that matters. Data targeting midlevel civil servants allow them to prioritize the FLN agenda over the more urgent (but less important) ways to spend their time; to determine the specific expectations of coaches and quality assurance officers; and to check, at the midlevel geographic level, how the average learning outcomes are changing over time and how they compare to the neighboring locale. It's the midlevel civil servant who moves an FLN priority expressed in a speech by the minister into real change—more time observing teaching in classrooms, more focus on pedagogy, more time actually teaching the effective materials in the classrooms.

What drives behavior is the subnational availability and utilization of data. Does a particular FLN program link to results on SDG indicator 4.1.1a or 4.1.1b? That's great. But unless the midlevel structures in that country know where their subnational location stands on outcomes and program implementation; what the growth trajectory is over time; how their outcomes and civil servant behavior compares to the neighboring state, county, or district; and how they are performing in relation to the government's national benchmarks, not much will change about how these busy officials allocate their time.

Six characteristics of useful midlevel data

Others can figure out how to get the minister and the president to report on learning outcomes data. I want us to invest in ensuring that data can get used at the midlevel. The country-specific characteristics of the data shared at these midlevels will differ, but I want to make a case for six characteristics of these data and the methods used to communicate them.

1. **Share data that influence behavior**. To compete with the many other urgent priorities, we need results that look at the performance of decentralized levels of the system with respect to areas that they can control. For example: How many classroom visits did their coaches make? What proportion of teachers were observed that month? What is the (observed, not official) student-to-textbook ratio in schools? These indicators are critical to the theory of change of FLN programs and are malleable based on the behavior and daily choices of these officers.

2. **Share data that focus on instruction**. What differentiates FLN programs that work from others that struggle is the laser focus on instructional quality throughout the system, every day. For example, what proportions of observed teachers used the FLN program's teachers' guides? What proportions of observed teachers were well prepared for the literacy or numeracy lesson? What were the average learning outcomes of kids who were assessed by the system after the lesson? These are pedagogical issues. Critically, these are issues that the daily pedagogical choices of teachers can affect, fundamentally; and they are issues that the coaches, inspectors, and midlevel civil servants can observe without too much complex training or scaffolding. We want data on topics that can change, and if they change, learning can improve.

3. **Reduce the number of indicators**. We have all seen data dashboards that show so much information as to feel overwhelming. The program needs to decide what the key issues are and be brutal in that decision. If the program cannot decide what the essential measures of success are, it is not going to be effective anyway. Reducing requires focus on key behaviors, and focus is essential for this data

to drive behavior change from the midlevel of the system.

4. **Make the interface extremely simple**. The target audience consists of busy education leaders with many daily tasks. Expecting them to invest their time in reviewing a dashboard is a big step, and it is foolhardy to think that it will happen at all unless the resource is very simple to use.

5. **Make sure the data-visualization software works**. It is not worth rolling out a data dashboard until you know that it will not crash and that the data are reliable. You will be building a trust relationship, so wait until your dashboard can be trusted. Make sure the dashboard works on the devices that officers have, rather than only on the hardware possessed by those based in the capital city.

6. **Include indicators that matter to the system**. Effective monitoring and accountability systems embed an FLN program's data into what the system needs beyond just FLN. This step is more of an art than a science, but the most embedded FLN program dashboards can be ignored if they are not linked to other issues that the government is actively, currently, and urgently concerned about. What can the FLN program dashboard provide that is not available elsewhere? Maybe it is teacher attendance, or classroom visits tracked through a global positioning system, or student-to-textbook ratios. Whatever it is, connect what we care about (FLN instructional and learning data) to what these officers care about, and incentives will more closely align to increase the likelihood of behavior change. Even better is to take an existing, well-utilized dashboard and insert the FLN data while adding some functionality.

Donors and education implementers need to design for the reality of the middle level. Civil servants have busy lives and many competing priorities and we need to make sure FLN is a priority. To make FLN data matter to them, their job descriptions should include supervision with a particular focus on FLN. Some countries use performance contracts. Let us not be so focused on getting the data into the *Global Monitoring Report* or making sure the materials are of high quality that we miss opportunities to include FLN-improvement issues in revised performance contracts. What are the normal evaluation criteria used to promote a midlevel civil servant? Embed the FLN program and data utilization into that system. What are normal tools that these officers use every day? Get the FLN measures into those tools. What are the normal meetings that these officers attend with their bosses to talk about their daily priorities? Find a way to get the dashboard data shared at those meetings. There is power in having district leaders in a room reviewing midlevel (such as district-level) comparable data on the percentage of classrooms observed by these officers. It is even more powerful while the bosses of this midlevel leaders are in the room. This process needs to offer primarily positive reinforcement to successful midlevel civil servants rather than punishing those lagging behind. But behavior can rapidly change if the data resources are available, and if the system is aligned to encourage these officials to think about FLN learning outcomes consistently over time.

We are not the first educationists to think about how to improve the quality of education, nor the first to worry about how to use education data to improve decision-making. On the other hand, technology may make us the first generation to have tools available that allow us to focus meaningfully on midlevel civil servants' time utilization and daily pedagogical choices, through data.

It is possible, in many contexts, to identify what data and information are currently influencing the behavior of these midlevel officers, and to insert FLN priorities. I recommend that we reallocate some of the investment away from the national level averages that Girin is calling for and increase investments to get simplified and targeted data into the hands of these midlevel civil servants, holding them accountability for the outcomes. The international education sector has several methods of cost-effectively improving learning

outcomes,[3] and some of those are at large scale.[4] The sector has also shown an encouraging ability recently to focus on the learning crisis, with national leaders themselves pushing for country-level goals on improving FLN outcomes. What remains is the missing middle: maximizing the ability of the civil servants, inspectors, coaches, and quality assurance officers across LMICs to support these efforts on a daily basis to improve outcomes at scale.

3. Evans, D., & Mendez Acosta, A. (2020). *Education in Africa: What are we learning?* CGD Working Paper No. 542. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/education-africa-what-are-we-learning.pdf; Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel. (2020). *Cost-effective approaches to improve global learning: What does recent evidence tell us are "Smart Buys" for improving learning in low- and middle-income countries? Recommendations of the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel.* World Bank, UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, and Building Evidence in Education (BE²). http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/719211603835247448/pdf/Cost-Effective-Approaches-to-Improve-Global-Learning-What-Does-Recent-Evidence-Tell-Us-Are-Smart-Buys-for-Improving-Learning-in-Low-and-Middle-Income-Countries.pdf

4. Crouch, L. (2020). *Systems implications for core instructional support lessons from Sobral (Brazil), Pueble (Mexico), and Kenya.* Insight Note for the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Programme. https://riseprogramme.org/publications/systems-implications-core-instructional-support-lessons-sobral-brazil-puebla-mexico

Sleeping Soundly in the Procrustean Bed of Accounting-Based Accountability

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Girindre Beeharry's essay is indeed a clarion call to action for the global education architecture. As there have been many clarion calls before, the questions now are, "Can this time be different?" and more pointedly, "What can be done differently to make this time different?" In particular, I want to focus on both the need for, and, at the same time, the risks of strong accountability. Inducing high levels of performance from any system or organization requires structuring relationships of accountability that encourage purpose-driven actions that seek success. But, both individuals and organizations can easily adopt a key principle of many martial arts, which is to turn the strength of the attack against one's opponent. Calls for "strong accountability" are easily morphed into "accounting" centered accountability that focuses on process compliance, and "thin" targets on inputs and outputs. In order for organizations to change, to innovate, to continuously improve at implementation-intensive tasks, I have argued (with Dan Honig) that one needs to create "account" based accountability, that empowers agents and actors with objectives and demands an account of their performance: a narrative of what they did, what happened, what they learned, and what they are going to do next.[1]

There is a lot to learn from bits of conventional wisdom that are not just a little wrong, but completely, totally, opposite of right, wrong. One of those is "public sector organizations don't innovate because they are afraid of failure." I argue the truth is that public sector organizations are built to avoid blame and are designed to be able to fail without repercussions. Being robust to avoiding negative consequences when there are outcome failures is regarded as a feature, not a bug, of public sector accountability.

I remember discussing with a World Bank colleague many years ago an early ASER report showing that in a state of India we were working with only 11 percent of children could read adequately. I suggested that introducing greater performance accountability through the democratically elected local governments could perhaps help. My colleague's reaction was. "no, that is far too risky as local governments are weak." To which I responded, "What is the risk here? That reading performance will fall to 10 percent?" But my colleague was, of course, wiser than I was. She realized that the "risk" that governments worried about was not the risk that children's life chances were being spoiled and squandered by an education system brutally indifferent to them. Instead, the "risk" that governments and

1. Pritchett, Lant and Dan Honig. 2019. "The Limits of Accounting-Based Accountability in Education (and Far Beyond): Why More Accounting Will Rarely Solve Accountability Problems." *Center for Global Development Working Paper*, 510.

bureaucrats worried about was the risk of "blame." They had an accountability system centered on process compliance, and built so that failure to educate children never led to blame falling on anyone in the system, from top to bottom.

The title of my essay comes from the Greek myth of Procrustes, who had a short bed but, at the same time, wanted his bed to fit his guests. So, his ingenious solution, now adapted by education systems around the world, was to cut his guests' legs off so that they fit the bed. The creation of accountability systems that focus exclusively on process compliance, thin inputs (e.g., numbers of classrooms, availability of toilets, class size), and thin outputs (enrollment and grade attainment) has allowed the global education architecture and national education systems to sleep soundly on "schooling" even while "education" (learning outcomes and children acquiring the skills, capabilities and competencies they needed to succeed) was a nightmare—and, in many cases, getting worse.

Why did Education for All both succeed and fail?

As we in 2021 explore the scope of the learning crisis and explore ways to address it—from the global to the national to the local to the school and classroom—we want to be aware that we are hardly the first to raise and grapple with the issue of how to ensure universal quality education. We want to avoid Marx's quip that history repeats itself, first as tragedy and then as farce.

The documents that emerged from the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien Thailand in March 1990 are a very sobering read in 2021. Nearly everything in my 2013 book *The Rebirth of Education: Schooling Ain't Learning* and that motivate the RISE research program was already eloquently articulated in the World Declaration on Education for All, and the Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs. The preface tells us these documents were the result of an extended consultation process and emerged from a meeting of 1,500 participants from 155 governments,

20 intergovernmental bodies, and 150 nongovernmental bodies and "thus represent a worldwide consensus."

It is worrisome that that this now ancient document has selections that sound exactly contemporary. Forgive me if I quote some at length.

> *Article 4. Whether or not expanded education opportunities will translate into meaningful development—for an individual or for society—depends ultimately on whether people actually learn as a result of those opportunities.... The focus of basic education must, therefore, be on actual learning acquisition and outcome, rather than exclusively upon enrolment, continued participation in organized programmes and completion of certification requirements.*

> *Article 2, para 1: To serve the basic learning needs of all requires more than a recommitment to basic education as it now exists. What is needed is an "expanded vision" that surpasses present resource levels, institutional structures, curricula, and conventional delivery systems while building on the best in current practices. New possibilities exist today which result from the convergence of the increase in information and the unprecedented capacity to communicate.*

> *Article 8, para 1. Supporting policies in the social, cultural, and economic sectors are required in order to realize the full provision and utilization of basic education for individual and societal improvement. The provision of basic education for all depend son the political commitment and political will backed by appropriate fiscal measures and reinforced by educational policy reforms and institutional strengthening.*

Against its articulated vision "Education for All" has both succeeded and failed. The progress in expanding enrollments and grade attainments has been sustained, massive, and quite universal across countries. The calls for the "more" that was needed—more buildings, more teachers, more books—have mostly been heeded.

However, in many countries learning outcomes are still very, very low. Just one example comes from the PISA for Development data, from which I make two points. First, the average child, even of those who have persisted to grade 7, has very low performance. Second, while inequality in learning outcomes is large, even the socially advantaged children (male, urban, native of the country, who speak the language of assessment in the home) and who are from households in the socio-economic elite (two standard deviations above the average) are far behind (about half a typical country standard deviation) the global *minimum* SDG targets of PISA level 2—and almost none of them score at PISA levels 4 or above.

This is important because it indicates that it is not the case that countries have constructed an excellent education system for the elite from which others are "excluded" or "marginalized," but rather, countries have education systems that are producing a globally inadequate education for the elite—and the disadvantaged dropouts have even worse outcomes in that system. This implies that the teaching and learning practices enacted and in which the children of elite households engage in are ineffective at producing adequate levels of learning, even for them.

My conjecture is that the success and failure of Education for All (as a general proxy for efforts of the global education architecture) are sides of the same coin.

There was in fact a system of strong *accounting-based accountability* built into global and national systems. The data on enrollments is available and tracked in nearly every country and the UN (and other international) sources on enrollments (and its variants) are relatively complete across countries and relatively up to date. In contrast, until quite recently (with the impact of the SDGs) the data on learning outcomes at either the national or international level was sparse, lacked comparability, and not up to date. While it is not always the case that "what gets measured gets done" (as there are certainly examples of persistent measured failure), the converse is more reliable: "what does not get measured does not get done."

The dangers of accounting-based accountability

There are several clear and present dangers from building accounting-based accountability systems too strongly around a radically incomplete measure of the desired outcomes. As is evidenced by the Jomtien documents—or any clear statement of the purposes of education—the "time served" measures of school attendance as the "output" do not capture the true *outcome* goals of any education system. I want to highlight three of those dangers.

First, this approach, perhaps inadvertently but nevertheless inexorably, devalues the social status, respect, and appreciation of excellent teaching and excellent

Table 2. In the poorer countries participating in PISA-D even the advantaged children from SES households scored on average, fall below the SDG threshold

Subject	Average child (enrolled in grade 7 or higher) in PISA-D-6 countries	Average of the advantaged, SES elite HH children in public schools in PISA-D-6 countries	PISA level 2 threshold	Gap of advantaged, SES elite to reach SDG
Math	306.6	360.3	420.7	60.4
Reading	326.1	373.7	407.5	33.8
Science	332.5	375.1	409.5	34.4

Note: PISA-D-6 are the seven PISA-D countries, less Ecuador, which had been already a PISA participant and whose results are more typical of middle-income countries.

Source: Pritchett, Lant and Martina G. Viarengo, 2021, "Learning Outcomes in Developing Countries: Four Hard Lessons from PISA-D." RISE Working Paper 21/069.

teachers. That is, in any field or system where learning outcomes are actively sought after and acknowledged and respected, it is recognized that excellent teaching is a difficult and demanding vocation, and excellent teachers are recognized, praised, sought after, and valued.

In contrast, if the primary measures of the outcomes of a schooling system is time served—enrollments and grade attainment—and that is what the government and its ministers are held accountable for, then inevitably the counterpart of that as the accounting-based accountability output metric is to view teachers as custodians of warm bodies. If the school doors are open, children are enrolled in the school, and children are (mostly) in the classroom (and not making trouble or mischief outside the school), and this is regarded as "mission accomplished," then one can begin to understand the demoralization and norm-erosion in the profession of teaching that leads to the horrific levels of both absence from schools and absence from classrooms even while in school that is repeatedly shown in data in low-performing education systems.

The emphasis on high levels of teacher absence from classrooms can easily be misinterpreted as "blaming teachers" or as a sign that there are "weak accountability" systems. But I want to emphasize that starting out with noble goals can lead, through creating strong accountability systems around *limited*, strictly numeric, measures of process compliance, to thin inputs, and thin outputs can lead to perverse outcomes where exactly the wrong message is being sent to "frontline" agents (teachers and principals). The message sent by only measuring schooling is that schooling is what matters, and this message devalues teachers and teaching. If all a system asks for are reports on "butts in seats" and not "minds inspired" or "competencies gained" or "human beings respected and empowered," then one cannot identify, praise, and reward—socially through praise and honor, professionally through

acknowledgement by peers, and financially—those who do those things well, day in and day out, in difficult conditions.

Second, the lack of a commitment to learning goals and an acknowledgment of the complex nature of good teaching and a strong account-based accountability system driven by learning goals also leads to IT enabled information systems (EMIS) that attempt to create a quality education through driving on "thin" inputs. My distinction of "thin" and "thick" builds from the distinction made by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his idea of "thick description" as a method. The counterpart of "thick" (the detailed complex rich account of our own lives we all maintain) is "thin." As James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (details, the rise of "bureaucratic high modernism" of the civil service bureaucracies that dominate governments attempt to drive progress by reducing the lived reality of the "thick" to measurable, quantifiable, controllable "data."[2]

This conceptual approach and its organizational embodiments of "bureaucratic high modernism" are tremendously well-suited to the accomplishment of tasks which are, in their nature, logistical.[3] The modern post office is a truly amazing and awe inspiring organization in its capabilities to get a letter from any one place to any other place with safety, security of contents, and reliability (see *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy* by Daniel Carpenter (2001) for a fascinating historical account of the rise of the modern US Postal Service). Modern social security systems that provide income to millions of individuals promptly, reliably, accurately, and cheaply[4] are, again, awe inspiring, and have had massive positive impact.

The challenge of education is that one part of providing an education—schooling—is primarily a logistical task, whereas the provision of learning is fundamentally not logistical. This means that bureaucratic high modernism as a primary mode of organizing tasks, with its top-down, process compliance, thin-input measurement

2. Scott, James. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press.
3. Andrews, Matthew; Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock. 2016. *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action*. Oxford, UK: Oxford Univerity Press.
4. Wilson, James Q. 1989. *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*. Basic Books.

approach, is well adapted to the expansion of a formal school schooling. But, as I have argued elsewhere, there is massive design mismatch between learning focused instruction that seeks to equip students/learners with skills and competencies (of whatever type) and bureaucratic high modernism.[5]

The danger of EMIS systems is that they create a vicious circularity in which "success" is defined exclusively as progress on the indicators in the EMIS system. This means that if the EMIS measured "thin input" is not in fact reliably causally connected to the true desired outcome then the use of EMIS has effectively blinkered and blindered governments. Pritchett and Viarengo show that if one measures learning value added of individual schools in the private and public sector, then, particularly in countries with weak state capability, the *variability* in performance in (measured) value added is larger across public schools than across private schools.[6] This should strike you as somewhat puzzling as it means that private schools that generally are each individually operated schools and which have no overall "top down" control to impel equality in learning outcomes produce (again, in some instances) lower variability in learning value added than do public sector systems that in large part exist to achieve equality and uniformity. Our argument is that since the "thin inputs" that the state limits itself to seeing are only very weak correlates of school performance the state creates an administrative illusion of equality and a reality of wide variance in the actual conditions for learning across public schools.

A very dangerous variant of the "thin input circularity" that an accounting-based accountability system produces is the conflation of "invest in human capital" with "spend more on a government budget heading classified as education." I think economists have been negligent in not making the sharp differentiation between "economic cost" and "accounting cost." Accounting cost is whatever is spent. Economic cost is conceptually the *minimum* that would need to be spent to achieve a given outcome. Economic cost is an optimized amount. Without a clear and agreed upon set of outcome indicators, one can easily conflate "spending more" with "getting more" when the much more likely outcome of "spending more" in a system that is not coherent around learning goals is to only spend more but not get more. Pritchett and Aiyar demonstrate that in basic education in India, the government schools' accounting cost per student is more than twice as high as in the private sector and learning outcomes are much lower (both raw and adjusting for student quality).[7] Within economic theory, if it is the case that producers are efficient at translating resources into outcomes (hence costs per output of a given quality are minimized) and one is on the efficiency frontier, then one needs to spend more to get more. But nothing could be more obvious than that most education systems are nowhere near the efficiency frontier and multiple strands of evidence show the discrepancy is very large.

Few things are more fun and rewarding for global elites, political and otherwise, than to pose as advocates for better education by issuing vacuous calls for more spending while avoiding all of the hard, nitty-gritty, and not-always-popular work of actually improving education.

Third, the lack of an accountability system built around learning goals makes effective innovation that produces progress on learning impossible. In systems that produce continuous improvements—whether in natural systems, like evolution, or in human-made systems, like economies or organizations—there are three components: generating novelty, evaluating novelty against

5. Pritchett, Lant. 2013. "The Rebirth of Education: From 19th Century Schools to 21st Century Learning," Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press for Center for Global Development; Pritchett, Lant and Yamini Aiyar. 2014. "Value Subtraction in Public Sector Production: Accounting Versus Economic Cost of Primary Schooling in India." Center for Global Development Working Paper, 391.

6. Pritchett, Lant and Martina G. Viarengo. 2009. "The Illusion of Equality: The Educational Consequences of Blinding Weak States," *Center for Global Development Working Paper.*

7. Pritchett, Lant and Yamini Aiyar. 2014. "Value Subtraction in Public Sector Production: Accounting Versus Economic Cost of Primary Schooling in India." *Center for Global Development Working Paper*, 391.

a performance objective, and scaling novelties that are evaluated as improvements (e.g., more cost effective).

In a system with accounting-based accountability built around process compliance, thin inputs, and thin outputs, there are difficulties with all three components of innovation to improve learning outcomes: generation, evaluation, and scaling. One, without a strong and agreed upon performance measure organizations have a hard time authorizing agents to engage in innovative behaviors. Who is allowed to engage in doing something different than the standard operating practice? If one has circularly defined process compliance as the goal, then there is not space for positive deviance. Two, and related, without a strong and agreed upon performance measure there is no way of evaluating novelty. Suppose a teacher engages in some new classroom practice. Was that new practice better or not? In "time served" accountability systems, even if the new practice produces much better learning outcomes at lower cost, since there is no regular, reliable, relevant measures of the learning outcomes to be achieved, there is no functional standard for evaluating this new practice. This can produce an environment in which there is massive and ongoing generation of novelty, with lots of new and "innovative" practices being introduced each year but little or no sustained progress because the organization has no way of evaluating novelty and saying "yes" to this and "no" to that. Three, without an agree upon performance goal there is no way to effectively scale better practices, as it is difficult to induce adoption of practices, even when they are better, against the natural bureaucratic resistance to change.

This produces two phenomena that block effective innovation.

One is resistance to effective interventions that are "disruptive"[8] (Christensen 1997) in that they are not "agenda conforming." Banerji's (2015)[9] account of the introduction of "teaching at the right level" in Bihar India and Aiyar et al.'s forthcoming account of the reforms in Delhi schools are excellent narratives of how hard it is to scale effective practices in accounting-based accountability systems.

The other is pervasive "isomorphism"[10] in which innovations that might have proved effective elsewhere are adopted for show or signaling or to get outside resources but without any real commitment and hence are adopted on the surface but have little or no impact. For instance, Muralidharan and Singh evaluated the adoption at scale in Madhya Pradesh India a program of "school improvement plans" that was a variant of a successful program in the UK.[11] They find that the "innovation" of school improvement plan was implemented—schools did in fact produce these plans—but that literally nothing else happened. Schools did not act on their plans, supervisors did not change their supervision to assist/monitor the implementation of the plans, practices in the school did not change, hence, not surprisingly, learning did not improve. Bano (2021)[12] reports on a "thick description" report on School Based Management Committees in Nigeria and finds they are having little to no impact but are continually being promoted by the national and state ministries of education but in a way that is entirely isomorphism to create among external agents supporting education the appearance of innovation, while, at the same time, allowing them to ignore the difficult issues that need to be addressed.

8.   Christensen, Clayton. 1997. *The Innovator's Dilemma: The Revolutionary Book That Will Change the Way You Do Business*. Cambidge MA: Harvard Business School Press.

9.   Banerji, Rukmini, 2015, "How Do Systems Respond to Disruptive Pedagogic Innovations? The Case of Pratham in Bihar." RISE Working Paper 15/002 23 October 2015.

10.   DiMaggio, Paul J; Powell, Walter W.;. 1983. "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields " *American Sociological Review* 48(2 (April)), 147-60; Andrews, Matthew; Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock. 2016. *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

11.   Muralidharan, Karthik and Abhijeet Singh. 2020. "Improving Public Sector Management at Scale? Experimental Evidence on School Governance in India." *RISE Working Paper*, 20/056.

12.   Bano, Masooda, 2021 (forthcoming), "International Push for SBMCs and the Problem of Isomorphic Mimicry: Evidence from Nigeria." *RISE Working Paper*.

Conclusion

With the benefit of 30 years of hindsight, I argue that Education for All succeeded at those dimensions of education systems that could successfully be accomplished with bureaucratic high modern organizations operating with accounting-based accountability that reduced accountability to process compliance, thin inputs and thin outputs. But it failed, and in many countries failed totally, on those dimensions of education that are "thick" and require accountability systems that are coherent around producing performance on outcomes.

The strong but thin accountability for expansion in enrollments exclusively was part of the success and part of the failure. This had three downsides: it devalued teaching, it created a circularity of confusing inputs and outputs for outcomes, and it inhibited effective innovation in improving learning outcomes.

Sadly, from the narrow point of view of the bureaucratic high modern organizations (the top-down "spider" systems that dominate public schooling and the global education architecture) many of these are features of a desirable mode of accountability that allow organizations to fail on outcomes goals without blame, not a bug, even if this facilitates persistently low learning performance.

In sum, I heartily endorse the emphasis on creating strong accountability for learning performance, particularly around foundational skills, in Girin's essay, but want to emphasize that nearly everything in the existing global and national education architecture will resist the creation of education systems with the strong performance driven, account-based accountability systems that are needed to revalue teaching as a profession, to shift away from input-driven definitions of success, and to create a system that empowers innovation.

What Girin is saying is both common sense and will require a revolution to achieve.

Taking Education Seriously

Jaime Saavedra, Global Director for Education, World Bank

Girin Beeharry's essay in the *International Journal of Educational Development* gives us an opportunity to consider why we are failing to give children a good education, exactly who should be accountable for that failure, and what can be done. The article is the result of many years of thinking and discussion, and, to certain extent, a level of frustration that I share. Frustration because progress in education is not fast enough. And frustration because what has to be done is not out of reach from a technical or pedagogical perspective. Yet at the same time, it often seems an intractable and unsurmountable challenge. It is a frustration I felt while dealing with education reform in my country, Peru.

Change *is* possible and children's education experience *can* be improved quickly. Books can be put in the hands of children, teachers *can* be supported, principals can be empowered so that they can better run their schools. We know some interventions and practices that are impactful and have been successfully implemented by countries, particularly in primary education. The evidence on structured pedagogy, teacher induction and coaching, assessment for learning, and ensuring more time for instruction is solid, for example. But can these technical solutions be sustained and reach everyone, everywhere quickly? That is more difficult, but it should not be impossible. It is not rocket science. (And even if it were, programs were built in less than a decade to land men on the moon.) In this essay I discuss, in light of Girin's paper, the challenge of education reform and how the international community–in service to national priorities–can better support countries to eliminate learning poverty.

Moving education outcomes requires more than technical solutions

So, if it is technically possible, why doesn't it happen? Girin says that "moving education outcomes is incredibly hard." Indeed, from a political perspective, it is incredibly hard. As Girin says, it also requires persistence, ingenuity, and political savvy. One way I like to put it is that change in education requires all players to understand that their ultimate goal should be an educated and happy child. It sounds obvious, but…it isn't. Frequently, interests other than a child's education influences the behavior of different actors. Trade unions might seek political influence and can block reforms to make teachers' careers meritocratic and professionalized. Bureaucrats might try to protect their power base or their jobs. Teachers might be fixated on job security and could resist evaluation. Service providers, meanwhile, in their quest for profit, might push for solutions that don't promote student welfare. Suppliers of textbooks, suppliers of low-quality education, and providers of private tutoring services may all have an interest in maintaining the status quo, even if that means that children are not learning. And in the budgetary process, education might be seen as consumption and not as an investment.

These entrenched interests of stakeholders make reform seem politically extremely challenging, and there is a sense of inevitability. Sometimes governments end up implementing marginal reforms without really tackling the real impediments to change. Only when the system puts politics and special interests aside and

focuses on learning and the interests of the child is improvement possible. We need more than a technical design. We need implementation capacity. And we need political alignment. The executive, the president, and in particular, the minister of finance, must be convinced about the critical importance that investing in people has for the future of the country.

When more than half of all children are learning poor, we have a crisis on our hands

There has been a huge rise in schooling and most children (though not all, yet) go to school. That is progress. Simply going to school brings tremendous benefits to children. So, is Girin right that we are failing? Or are we just uncomfortable with the lack of relative progress in a development process that has witnessed impressive gains in human wellbeing over the last decades? The answer is yes—we are really failing. Given the level of wealth that exists in the world and the know-how we already have, it is morally unacceptable that more than half of all children cannot read a simple text by the age of 10 in low and middle-income countries. This—the share of 10-year-olds who cannot read and understand a simple text—is Learning Poverty, a concept we at the World Bank have proposed, to better quantify and communicate a real urgency to make progress on literacy and foundational learning.

Learning Poverty should be zero. It should be eliminated the same as extreme poverty or hunger. There are many reasons to place foundational learning at the heart of national education strategies. All kids should read because it is a prerequisite: you learn to read so you can use reading to learn other things. Literacy and numeracy are the building blocks of virtually every other outcome that we care about in education. And if there is learning at school and a fulfilling overall school experience, completion rates increase. Learning begets more learning. And systems that are institutionally and technically prepared to assure reading skills for all, are

most likely able to deliver other competencies, at least in primary education.

And a simple concept like learning poverty facilitates the political visibility of the development challenge. That schooling is not always translated into learning is starting to be clear in the policy circles, but not necessarily in the minds of public opinion. And that change in mindsets, where societies, families, and parents care about learning, is essential

As Lant Pritchett has insisted relentlessly over the last decade, schooling is not learning. And schooling is finishing too early for many, to a certain extent, precisely because of low learning quality. With half of children in low and middle-income countries not acquiring the foundational skills that are the basis for any future learning, and hence leaving the system totally unprepared for life, we are living through a dramatic learning crisis. Which has gotten even more serious with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Change starts with national governments

Who is failing these hundreds of millions of children? Is it the international community? National governments? Parents and families? Girin's paper focuses on how the international community is failing to improve outcomes. But any discussion about what that community can do needs to start from one place: national governments. The solution to the learning crisis lies in what national governments can do. It is their job to solve it. Finland or Singapore or Korea never believed that the international community would transform their education systems.

In late 2012, one month after I started my three-year tenure as minister, we received the news that Peru came last in PISA. I knew that as a middle-income country with substandard educational outcomes, Peru was responsible for addressing its challenge. I never even remotely thought that solving that the crisis—suddenly discovered by so many of my fellow citizens in the newspaper headlines of that day—could be the

responsibility of the international community. Except in extraordinary circumstances—for example, times of humanitarian crises—primary responsibility for providing children with the basic human right of learning lies with national governments. The role of national governments frames the role and the possibilities of the international community.

It might be possible to move the education community, step by step, toward a greater focus on foundational literacy and numeracy

Girin is wise and bold to say that to deepen the commitment to foundational literacy and to improve the effectiveness and increase the accountability of the international community, the right move is to leave the international aid architecture roughly as it is and make bold, incremental moves from there. Given the magnitude of the crisis, this may seem surprising, and one might have instead expected an urgent call for a dramatic shake up to the current structure. But changing the architecture will consume an immense amount of mental bandwidth and entail lengthy discussions about roles and organization. Strategically, a push for dramatic change like that could be a bad move. Huge strides can be made with more communication, coordination, and a sense of common mission. The seeds for that exist already and we can build upon them. As Girin says *"small tactical moves…"*. Small tactical moves may not be easy in large and complex organizations, but they are viable.

We must recognize that policymakers face many valid and competing priorities to foundational learning

I should clarify that I might put some caveats to Girin's use of the verb "prioritize" referring to foundational learning. The paper suggests that all partners, and especially the World Bank because of its leadership role, must prioritize efforts on foundational learning.

Prioritization of those areas implies that they will be deemed more important than other things. Prioritization does indeed de facto happen in real life, but it responds to political, financial, and social dynamics and, hopefully, also to evidence and technical considerations.

The international community can promote, support, and advocate for certain causes, and it can make a difference to national priorities. Stopping violence in and around schools, improving educational opportunities for girls, and ensuring that all children can read by the age of 10 are areas that deserve national and international attention and should be priorities. But it is impossible, from a political, human rights, and technical perspective, to cater to only the primary age children. Young people require education and skills-building opportunities (even more so if they went through a low-quality basic education system), pre-school-age children require stimulation and play opportunities. One demographic group cannot be prioritized over all others.

National targets and accountability for learning poverty are what matters

I agree with Girin's urgent call for accountability. What might be needed is collective accountability. The World Bank and other partners in the education aid architecture could consolidate a nascent agreement on definitions, objectives, monitoring frameworks, and targets into formal accountability framework that we all sign up to in order to hold ourselves to account. The World Bank has proposed reducing learning poverty by half by 2030. We set that as an ambitious but feasible target. It is superior to the laudable SDG4 target—all children having quality primary and secondary education by 2030—because the SDG4 is -unfortunately- unachievable and hence is less useful to motivate concrete action. And as a global target, it is superior to setting input-related targets or setting financing targets. Yes, more resources are needed. But merely calling for

more money is not enough. Committing and setting a target on learning is harder and riskier. It is not totally under your control. It is not about the political struggle around financial resources. It is not about accounting frameworks that count books, laptops, school grants, or boring teacher training days. Improving learning requires the tricky process of getting a lot of people to change their behavior.

But improving accountability within international organizations will be a futile exercise if it is not subsidiary to the accountability of national governments. On one hand, the education architecture can be accountable to provide all possible support. But, on the other hand, and more importantly, governments need to be accountable for setting up the social contract that will allow them to deliver quality education to all and reduce learning poverty. This means setting a national target on learning poverty. Pragmatically, a national indicator might be different to our global target—to reduce learning poverty by half by 2030. That doesn't matter, as long as it is about learning. It can be called something different. Countries with very high levels of learning poverty might choose intermediate outcome measures, like word recognition. And countries can set targets that are higher or lower than "halving by 2030." There is a parallel with poverty reduction. Countries can use a monetary poverty indicator (income or consumption), a basic needs definition, or a multidimensional poverty indicator. But what matters is that they monitor their progress in poverty reduction and they commit to its reduction.

Will all countries be willing to monitor learning poverty? To set targets and monitor progress? Will they have the political will to implement needed reforms? Many already do. I believe it will happen eventually in all countries, but might take some time.

Three ways the international community can support domestic efforts to improve learning

First, the international community has a role to play in promoting efforts to measure and monitor progress.

There has been a recent expansion in learning data. Enough to be able to assert that there is a learning crisis. But in many countries, data is sparse; specifically, in sub-Saharan Africa, where almost 50 percent of countries have no data at all on learning. The international community can support building national capacity to implement learning assessments, where needed, and it can foster regional and international comparisons, which have been useful to all countries as a way to benchmark their progress. The WB is currently supporting about 50 countries in improving their data on learning is working with UNESCO/UIS to expand coverage, improve quality and foster better use of the data for decision making at the school and the country level. We need to double down further on measuring more and better.

Second, the international community can help reduce the disconnect between globally available evidence and implementation at country level.

Countries can learn from each other and can be inspired by practices in other countries. The international community should be more effective in systematizing knowledge and practice and facilitate the flow of information and the diffusion of ideas, evidence, and policy options to countries. But more collaboration with practitioners and researchers at the country

level is needed. There is support available in the form of technical assistance, although not to the extent needed; and that assistance should be reassessed and conceptualized as part of a process of sustained capacity building and joint learning. And the multilateral and bilateral organizations can work together with governments to be more effective in that process.

Third, the international community can support countries that show political commitment to education reform.

More knowledge, more tools or increasing the availability of technical assistance can support but will not trigger nor sustain reforms. Implementing reforms in a country depends on the willingness and capacity of a country to commit politically to put the outcome front and center, and commit the financial, technical, and managerial resources needed. Can the international community support that? Yes, it can. It can redouble efforts to support countries that show the political commitment to take bold action. Girin is also wise to suggest "working with countries and agencies already persuaded of the need to prioritize foundational literacy and numeracy." We have examples of bold action and committed reform to learn from. In Korea since the 1950s, in Scandinavia and Singapore in the 1960s, in Vietnam in the 1990s, in Ceara, Brazil in the 2010s, and in Edo, Nigeria in the 2020s. This is why my team at the World Bank is collaborating with the Gates Foundation to support the Accelerator Program, partnering with UNICEF and USAID, in supporting countries who focus on the outcome of learning and show political commitment. It is about political will, it about a good technical design, it is about implementation capacity. It is happening in parts of the world. Should happen everywhere.

The Paradox Burden: Lessons for Global Education from the Transformation of Health

Oliver Sabot, Director, Nova Pioneer

It's 2003 and the rapidly growing HIV/AIDS pandemic is devastating much of the world. Activists and celebrities are pressuring wealthy countries to mobilize unprecedented funding to expand life-saving treatment to millions regardless of where they live. Governments, philanthropists, and technical experts gather and decide that the best solution is not to target a single disease but to strengthen the delivery of health systems to address a range of plagues. Despite his hesitancy, Bill Gates is convinced to support the initiative as the vehicle to eradicate polio and expand access to vaccines. After much debate, the gathered luminaries agree that the new effort should be channeled through the existing development aid architecture to prevent fragmentation. The Global Health Fund is launched to achieve all of the health Millennium Development Goals with great fanfare, funding, and expectation.

This is, of course, revisionist history. A sea change of attention and funding did sweep through global health at start of the new millennium. But that energy was divided into distinct, issue-specific pillars, and several new financing institutions most notably GAVI and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, were launched not to pursue broad strategies from within the existing aid system, but as new standalone entities targeting specific diseases.

This outcome was not inevitable. There were many who argued at the time—and continue to argue—that the new funds should be invested holistically into countries' health systems rather than into individual disease priorities. The outcomes of this "shape debate" between vertical and horizontal solutions were central to the evolution of the sector and the lives of the tens of millions of people it serves. While hypothetical, the alternative outcome of that debate, along with the hard lessons learned by the global health community over the past two decades can and should inform a similar critical debate currently facing global education.

In his recent eloquent essay, "*The pathway to progress on SDG 4 requires the global education architecture to focus on foundational learning and to hold ourselves accountable for achieving it*" Girin Beeharry challenges the global education community to rally around a single specific target—improving foundational literacy and numeracy—instead of diffusing energy over all the education outcomes contained in the Sustainable Development Goals. As a fellow veteran of global health who migrated to education (building programs from early childhood to post-tertiary), I think it is valuable to consider Girin's proposal in light of the experience from its sister social sector.

The intolerable present

Before diving into what global education can glean from its sibling, it is important to establish a common foundation from which to assess those lessons.

First, there are meaningful intrinsic differences between health and education, with education typically at the shallow end of the sectoral genetic pool. Most glaringly, health benefits from an armory that is as close as we get to "magic bullets" in social impact—vaccines and bed nets and antibiotics.

Education practitioners also often point to the massive gulf in funding between the two sectors. There are surely inherent drivers of that difference: the draw of tangible products and the energized global HIV/AIDS and health activist community, among others. But, as I'll return to later, the relationship is multidirectional—limited progress likely leads to limited funding as much as the inverse. Regardless of results, it is clear that there will not be a dramatic increase in global education aid for years, if ever. As much as we may all wish the world were different, Girin rightly urges the global education community to not use funding constraints as a crutch.

Second, we have to fully diagnose the disease before we can debate the prescription. The opening scene of Lant Pritchett's book, *The Rebirth of Education*, should haunt all of us who work in global education. An Indian father, told that his child is not learning anything at a school he labored endlessly to afford, vents his anguish. "You have betrayed us," he cries at the school leaders.

Girin reminds us that millions of other families are similarly betrayed every year. Nine out of every ten 10-year-olds cannot read. At the heart of Girin's prescription, beneath even his specific proposal to focus on literacy and numeracy in sub-Saharan Africa, is an embodiment of those betrayed families, a conviction that this appalling status quo must be broken apart and remade. The specific medicine may vary, but something must change, dramatically. And every institution and individual tasked with midwifing that change must hold themselves accountable.

The burden of proof

With that foundation in place, let's return to our alternate history, fast-forwarding seven years and imagining a gathering of our founding luminaries to review the progress of the new fund. We could survey a hundred experts in global health and receive a hundred different answers of how those years might have evolved. But it is likely many of them would paint a picture similar to this one.

The review of the Global Health Fund shows that the billions it channeled to countries resulted in many health workers hired and trained and many new facilities developed. Drugs and vaccines and bed nets were purchased and distributed, but the limited volume of these commodities meant that prices of these products remained high and innovation glacial. Several countries and districts achieved visible success in reducing illnesses and deaths. But, though its proponents stress patience, that systems change takes time to yield fruit, the fund can show little quantifiable gain in the metric that motivated the historic coalition—lives saved. Financing for the fund gradually declines and the sector stagnates.

Some will argue that this scenario is unfairly bleak. But this outcome—insufficient impact on the ultimate outcome, dwindling donor interest, and eventual decline—is much closer to the norm of decades of development initiatives than the actual experience of global health over the past two decades.

That experience has been striking: polio nearly eradicated, malaria deaths halved, the trajectory of the HIV/AIDS pandemic bent and more than twenty million on life-extending treatment. To be sure, this progress has come with plenty of missteps and failures. And it is a fair critique that these disease-specific initiatives have not done enough to build the general services that would address other major causes of death and misery.

But the question that anyone who encourages global health to now move to a more diffuse approach must face is: "With whom does the burden of proof lie?" The focused, narrow approach that has dominated the sector for the past two decades has saved millions of lives. Clearly the burden is on any proposal that would dramatically change strategy to demonstrate that it will match or exceed that impact—a high bar to meet.

The global education community should ask itself the same question as it considers Girin's proposal. In this case, it would seem the burden rests with the incumbent. As Girin highlights, quality outcomes in many countries are appalling and large-scale progress is absent and barely measurable with current data. Girin's proposal is, effectively, to follow the playbook written by global health: to narrow, to focus, and then have initial tangible success breed further funding and success. As a result, perhaps the high bar the global education community must meet is to not adopt the prioritization he urges.

Like all prioritization, Girin's prescription is inherently frightening. What if we are wrong and the resources would have been better focused on different priorities within education? How can we turn away from other levels of education and the millions of youth they serve when there is so much need?

It is important to not be Panglossian about the impact of prioritization and the trade-offs it entails. Many people have died over the past decades from simple preventable conditions while funds were pouring into HIV/AIDS or malaria campaigns down the road. But, as our alternative history illustrates, the counterfactual may be much greater overall suffering.

More positively, the education community can take heart from the evidence of virtuous cycles and knock-on effects in health. Funding continued to rise steeply for health for over a decade despite the demands of other pressing global issues like climate change and, yes, education. This was fueled, at least in part, by donors and their constituents seeing concrete gains. Success did indeed breed further funding and greater success.

And some of that success has spilled over. While not as much as perhaps they should, clinics or warehouses built with HIV/AIDS funding often do treat other conditions. And many less visible health priorities—treatment of diarrheal disease and deworming, among others—have been able to ride the coattails of the larger initiatives to secure funds and make tangible progress.

These feedback loops can give comfort that prioritizing foundational literacy and numeracy need not be a death sentence for other education goals. In fact, the experience of health suggests that a concerted, focused drive towards a specific goal could be the key to unlocking greater funding for and attention to those other worthy priorities over time.

The agony of accountability

The transformation of global health was fueled not just by what it focused funding on but also how it spent those funds.

The Global Fund and GAVI are now such ingrained elements of the funding architecture it is easy to forget how radical their structures were at the time. The Global Fund promised new standards of accountability in aid. Countries would commit to specific targets and, if they did not achieve those goals, would see their funding shut off. Both the Global Fund and GAVI sought to avoid the tangled interests that impede real accountability by passively judging funding from a distance and empowering countries to develop their own plans rather than sending in consultants and experts to design the programs.

The reality has, of course, been far messier since those early heady years when the Global Fund shocked the community by following through on its promise and canceled the first grants for poor performance. But a culture of accountability was an important factor in the early rapid growth of the sector and contributes to its sustained momentum.

How many grants have been canceled and funds withdrawn over the continuing failure to improve learning

outcomes? What would it look like for global education to pursue similar radical shift towards accountability?

An obsession with concrete targets was another critical contributor to the rising tide of health funding. The global HIV/AIDS community was initially anchored by the World Health Organization's "3x5" target (three million people on antiretroviral treatment by 2005) and then a similar set of US government targets for treatment, prevention, and care. Malaria's meteoric rise featured weekly discussions around the world about the quantities of bed nets produced and distributed compared to the level needed to slash deaths from the disease. A delay or unexpected funding gap would send tremors along the web of global actors, sometimes ending in calls to senior leaders to resolve bottlenecks.

These were not typical development goals, broad aspirations that are rarely measured and discussed tactically. They were more like many private company goals—loadstones that are similarly unachievable but that rally the organization through regular measurement and problem solving. To be sure, like most development targets, many of those early global health anchors were missed, sometimes badly. But they served their purpose: accelerating action, focusing attention and problem solving, and, most importantly, building the systems and culture to consistently measure the key outcomes. It is doubtful that the world would be providing more than 20 million people with AIDS treatment—or as effectively measuring that outcome—if it hadn't initially pursued and fallen short of "3x5" and similar targets.

Those targets were no less controversial than a single global education target would be today. An AIDS treatment or malaria bed net target excluded the many other important interventions needed to thwart those epidemics, let alone the many other health priorities. Their architects persevered through the debates, arguing that tangible success in those narrow priorities would attract funding and energy to the broader armory of interventions. Subsequent evidence weighs in their favor.

What would it look like for the global education community to adopt a similar obsession on learning outcomes? We can imagine that standardized outcome data would be captured every year across every country, instead of the often-outdated patchwork Girin highlights. Governments, funders, and partner organizations would pore over the data, identifying interim actions that could be closely tracked knowing that the next measurement and the potentially awkward attention it would bring was just around the corner. It would not be a panacea, but it could be a leap forward.

Here again, given the dire status quo Girin describes, it is important to ask whether the burden of proof rests with this strategy of obsessive measurement and problem solving or with its alternatives?

Less can truly be more

Things in global development tend to fall apart; the center rarely holds (with apologies to Yeats).

Public versus private, prevention versus treatment, products versus systems, global versus country, more research is needed versus we need to act now—these and other divisions have riven global development for decades. They are a natural and, at times, healthy product of limited resources and attention; trade-offs are inevitable.

But these dichotomies often impede progress. Great energy is invested in winning seeming zero-sum battles between camps while the optimal path is to pursue the two opposites together at the same time. This is fiendishly hard. Too often there are facile calls for unity that ignore the complexity and nuance of this task. And so, underneath the surface, things fall apart again. Our minds seem to hate paradox and push us to either fix on one pole or oscillate between them; we want simple answers, a world of black and white.

Girin's essay is a clarion call to rise above those polarities and embrace the elusive, thorny paradox that could be the key to improving the lives of millions. At first glance, his paper seems to be the opposite; he is,

after all, calling on the community to focus deeply on foundational literacy and numeracy and not on other essential education goals. But, in reality, he is transcending another false dichotomy. In our world of deeply constrained—and now potentially shrinking—global education financing, a broad focus on many goals is a de facto position that if we cannot do everything well we should do nothing well.

Girin exhorts us to defy that polarization. He invites us to wrap our minds around the idea that doing less is, in this case, doing more. We can, he argues, do one thing really well and then use that success as a foundation to foster broader progress, both for individual children who need core skills to thrive in later schooling and the global education movement as a whole.

I am not currently immersed enough in the evidence to know whether Girin's prescription of foundational literacy and numeracy is the right one. Perhaps secondary learning outcomes or employment rates would be the best starting focus? From a distance, his argument to focus on the skills that are the cornerstone of all further learning is compelling. But regardless of the target, I dearly hope that the community embraces Girin's broad message: that it chooses to do one thing really well, that it measures that outcome relentlessly, and that it obsesses over progress towards its goal in an effort to hold everyone in the effort accountable for squeezing the greatest possible impact out of always-limited funding. If we do, the seas may not change as dramatically as in health, but the tides may become more favorable, transforming the lives of millions of children.

Girin has shown us the path to that better world; the burden is now ours to carry.

Should Foreign Aid for Education Focus Exclusively on Raising Second-Grade Test Scores?

Justin Sandefur, Senior fellow, Center for Global Development

Girin Beeharry's recent essay in the *International Journal of Educational Development* is, more than anything else, a manifesto. The core empirical premise of this manifesto is that education systems in much of the developing world are failing. Millions of kids are going to school for multiple years and emerging functionally illiterate and innumerate. But Girin's goal is not to rehash well-known statistics about the global "learning crisis," or even to diagnose the causes for that failure. He wants to put forward a broad vision of how international donors to global education can escape the mess they're in.

This manifesto has three pillars. First, donors should prioritize foundational literacy and numeracy— essentially, test scores in 2nd grade—above all other education goals. This focus on early-grade reading and math has the dual merits of being instrumental to advancing other loftier goals, and inherently egalitarian, inasmuch as it "raises the floor" of minimum educational outcomes. Second, national governments and international organizations should invest in a global regime of standardized testing to monitor progress on this goal. And third, aid donors must be held accountable for improving those test scores.

Girin's zeal for the cause of early-grade learning, and his bluntness about who is failing and how, make his essay more compelling than most white papers in the aid sector. He names names, or at least organizations. And as the founding director of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's work in global education, when Girin addresses officials from the World Bank, UNESCO, or USAID, he's speaking to friends and professional colleagues. He believes in their collective enterprise, understands the bureaucratic constraints they face, and exploits that understanding to propose concrete ways they could, by his metrics, do better. To be transparent here, I should note that many of the organizations Girin calls out, both for praise and criticism, are Gates Foundation grantees, as is the Center for Global Development, where I work. Having recently stepped back from his main Gates role, one senses that Girin feels liberated to speak his mind, making the essay refreshingly candid.

Stated so nakedly, Girin's proposal to reorient international aid for education around primary-school test scores is sure to provoke opposition in many quarters. So I think it's important to note some of the intellectual traps that Girin's essay avoids, and that separate this piece from some of his potential allies in the push for a focus on testing and accountability—what critics have labeled the "Global Education Reform Movement" or GERM.

1. First, Girin's call for greater accountability is not code for blaming teachers for educational failures.

So often, the moral panic in conservative circles that "our children aren't learning" transitions seamlessly into a denunciation of lazy teachers and the nefarious influence of teachers' unions. In contrast, the call for accountability here is explicitly about accountability within institutions like UNICEF or the Global Partnership for Education, and not a call to deploy carrots and sticks against teachers.

2. Nor should Girin's call for better data on learning outcomes be read as a plea for more high-stakes testing. If anything, there is reason to believe that a focus on high-stakes exams at the end of primary or secondary school may detract from the focus on early-grade learning advocated in his essay.

3. The focus on monitoring and accountability at the system level allows for—though Girin's essay does not elaborate—a more sophisticated view of how education systems operate, beyond mechanistic policy levers subject to simple cost-benefit analysis. The piece avoids the gimmicky "solutionism" that plagues the sector. Girin harbors no illusions that if we just identify what works through rigorous research we can magically will it into being. Indeed, the piece is rather pessimistic—perhaps too much so for my own tastes as a researcher!—about the role for more impact evaluations to improve educational performance.

But while the essay avoids wedding itself to any specific set of education policies, Girin's rather monomaniacal focus on test scores as the proper goal of education system strikes me as a bit too narrow. His focus on low-cost pedagogical innovations gives too little weight, in my view, to the potentially higher returns to basic investments in easier-to-implement things like early-childhood development, free secondary schooling, and school meals. And its approach to governance of the international aid system can feel a bit, well, Gates-esque, in prioritizing a technocratic agenda over democratic consensus.

Figure 8. Estimated literacy rate among adult women by birth year and region
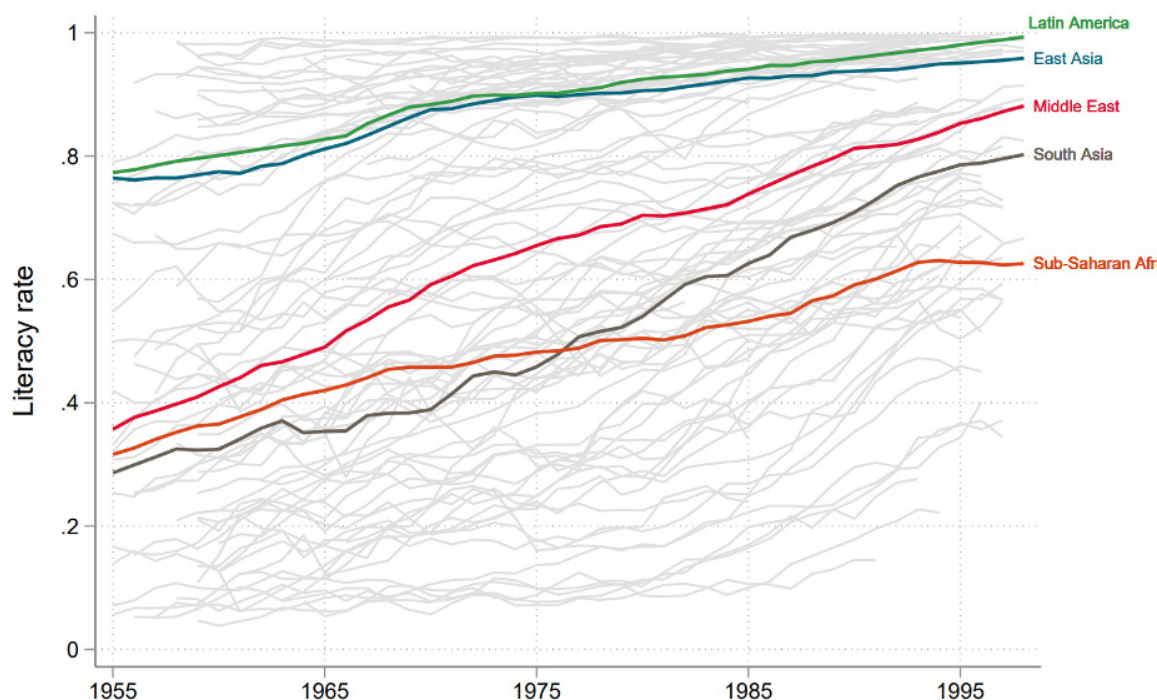
Note: horizontal axis shows year of birth.

Source: Le Nestour, Moscoviz, and Sandefur (2021) based on DHS and MICS data.

To counter those tendencies, I want to recommend three additional principles—beyond prioritizing, monitoring, and imposing accountability for learning outcomes—that global actors in education might consider.

Look for policies that are hard to get wrong, not ones that are hard to get right

Over the past half century, developing countries have dramatically improved their literacy rates, converging gradually to the levels of rich countries, and achieving far higher literacy rates at given levels of economic development than in decades past. They did this primarily by expanding access, an area where there's still some low-hanging fruit to be harvested: after all, in 2018 completion rates for lower-secondary school in low-income countries averaged just 40 percent.

Getting that number to 100 percent won't be cheap. It requires building secondary schools, hiring teachers, slashing fees, and repeating all the stuff we did to get the world tantalizingly close (but not quite) to universal primary enrollment. The point is, we know how to do it. The kinds of policies required constitute shovel-ready investments that can bring us closer to universal literacy and numeracy while reaping huge economic and social returns.

My concern is that Girin's proposal would essentially rule out the kinds of investments that have gotten us this far. The manifesto tells us to deemphasize raising education budgets, to resist the push for free secondary school and even pre-school, and to turn our attention to improving learning in early primary.

While I agree it would be nice to get more (learning) for less (money and time in school), this ignores what's worked historically in favor of what hasn't.

Unlike expanding schooling, scaling up successful pedagogical reforms to improve learning outcomes region- or nation-wide has proved very difficult almost everywhere. When the World Bank research department summarized the lessons of development

economics for policymakers, one of their core lessons was simply that "implementing successful small interventions at scale is hard." The first example cited comes from an NGO program to increase primary-school test scores in Kenya which my coauthors and I studied, and watched fall apart, as the government took it to scale.

That's not an isolated example. When researchers have gone out looking for successful programs to improve reading scores in the developing world through pedagogical innovations, they find a striking negative relationship between the scale of the program and the size of the effect (Crawfurd and Le Nestour, forthcoming).

Meanwhile, there are already feasible, rigorously tested, scalable policy alternatives to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes that are actually hard to get wrong. These are policies that even the most fragile states with limited implementation capacity have rolled out successfully. Make school affordable and convenient, and get more kids in school for more years. Provide free school meals to get more kids in school paying more attention. Increase instructional hours by extending the school day.

Yes, these things can be expensive. But the returns are high, and they've proven hard to get wrong, while improving pedagogy has proven hard to get right.

Let countries choose: there's no technical basis to force countries to invest in second-grade pedagogy instead of, say, universal preschool or free secondary school

Girin's essay expresses frustration with the "partnership structure" of the Global Partnership for Education, which, it contends, leads to a lack of focus. Girin laments that GPE's ability to prioritize the foundational literacy and numeracy indicator in the UN's list of SDG targets (i.e., target 4.1, indicator 4.1.1) is compromised by the partnership's need to attend to all 10 targets under SDG 4. He concludes with a fairly explicit call for donor countries to reduce their focus on "greater

collaboration" and turn instead toward accountability for outcomes.

Developing country governments could be forgiven for reading this as a call to reduce their voice in multilateral decision-making.

Compare the governance structure of GPE to the World Bank, which receives higher praise in the essay, and has received more money from the Gates Foundation. As a conduit for foreign aid for education, GPE provides developing countries and civil society with the most direct oversight and control, though UNICEF is arguably comparable. The World Bank's International Development Agency (IDA) lags behind, and at the opposite extreme, of course, are bilateral aid agencies where rich countries call all the shots.

This is reflected in how these various donors work on the ground. While GPE is forced to reach consensus among various stakeholders and follow country priorities, other donors have much more liberty to impose top-down solutions, especially in the poorest countries with the least bargaining power.

Developing countries ought to be able to choose whether they want to invest in expanding pre-schools or secondary schools, teacher training or performance bonuses, reducing school-based violence or increasing university scholarships. The goal of the global aid architecture should be to facilitate those democratic experiments, not to stifle them.

I don't want to overstate my case. During our roundtable discussion of his essay at CGD, Girin noted that if he were to write it over again, he'd start from the country perspective, rather than an agenda for global actors. He also mentions the idea of a coalition of the willing to attack the challenge of early-grade reading and math.

Figure 9. Board representation of rich and poor countries across different aid channels
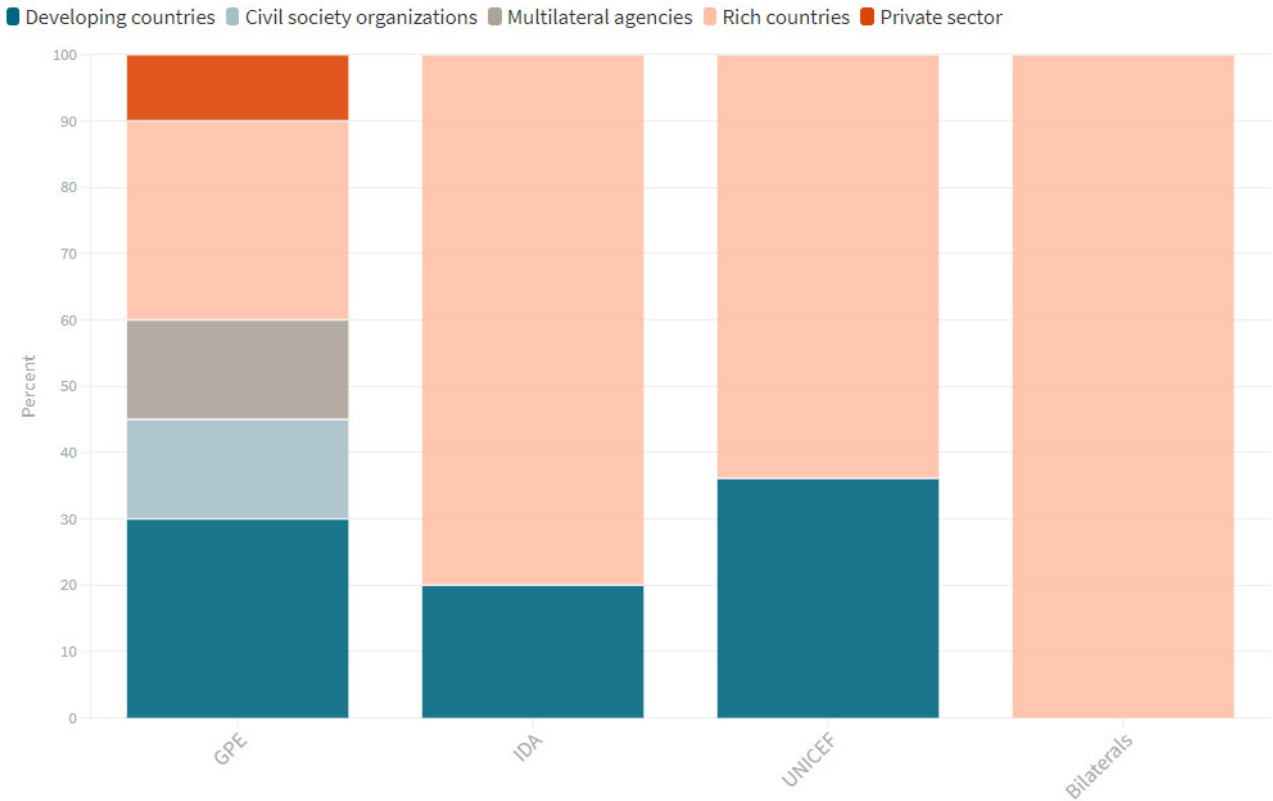
Reproduced from Akmal, Ali, Hares, and Sandefur (2021)

It's hard to argue with that voluntary approach, so long as external assistance is not conditioned on recipients adhering to donors' policy priorities.

First do no harm: Test scores come second to keeping kids safe, and we're failing at that

While it is disturbing to hear that millions of kids go to school every year without being exposed to the basics of literacy and numeracy, it is perhaps more disturbing to contemplate what they are exposed to.

In a survey of Zambian students age 13-15, the WHO found that over half had experienced physical violence in the past year, and roughly a third had experience sexual violence in their lifetimes. Figures were lower, but not nearly as low as you'd hope, in Namibia, Swaziland, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

Mind you, nobody really knows how much of that abuse is happening in schools, because we rarely ask. More recent data from the PISA-for-Development surveys found about 12 percent of Zambian girls reported sexual harassment by a teacher or school staff member in the past four weeks, as calculated by my colleagues Lee Crawfurd and Susannah Hares.

Underreporting is almost certainly a major problem here, and methods to elicit confidential responses to such sensitive questions have shown mixed results. But for the most part, nobody is asking. There is no routine system of data collection on physical or sexual abuse in schools in most developing countries. Unlike for foundational literacy and numeracy, there is no UNESCO monitoring effort to track the number of kids being raped by teachers. And there is no multimillion-dollar World Bank effort to develop new measurement tools to figure out whether children are being physically and sexually abused in school, or to study what we can do to improve child protection.

Prioritizing foundational literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of all else in education poses real trade-offs.

Admittedly there's a potential tension here between promoting a child protection agenda and my previous point about respecting country priorities. But if foreign donors are ever going to use financial leverage to shape domestic policy priorities, then the protection of basic human rights for children feels like a much more compelling basis for aid conditionality than the promotion of test scores over enrollment as the proper metric of educational performance.

What works, what matters, and what people want aren't always the same, and education policymakers face big trade-offs

In advocating such a hard line, Girin's proposal goes further than I think most aid donors can or should go in focusing *exclusively* on early-grade reading and math programs, and casting aside other priorities like child protection, early-childhood development, school feeding, and so on. My view is slightly less pessimistic than Girin's about the current path we're on. Educational investments over the past half century have yielded incredible returns. We should not despair about them, or hesitate to advocate for more money for school systems as they currently exist.

But despite my quibbles, Girin's provocative essay is a welcome departure from much of the stale platitudes that pass for debate in the global education sector. Many senior officials at donor agencies are quite accustomed to preaching about the need for more investment in early-childhood development in one meeting, and the benefits of free secondary schooling or vocational training in the next. Trade-offs go entirely unacknowledged.

Girin's manifesto calls us to confront these trade-offs head on, and hold ourselves accountable for those choices. His impatience with the current pace of progress, and insistence on laying down practical steps forward, has become a nagging voice in the back of my head. I hope his essay has the same effect on others.

How the Global Education Aid Architecture Can Work in Harmony on Foundational Learning

Laura Savage, Non-resident fellow, Center for Global Development

I am tempted to respond Girin's essay on the pathway to progress on SDG 4 in rhyme:

Raising the floor
On SDG 4
Is something
That needs us to fight.

Said Girin in prose
(to friends and no foes)
"these kids need to read
And to write."

Do you agree?
(asked implicitly)
The answer:
A vehement yes.

But "what" might be clear,
The "how" is (I fear)
Tied up in a
Battle of chess.

Etc).

But I am no Amanda Gorman, or Lin-Manuel Miranda. I'm a bureaucrat within the global education aid architecture.[1] In his recent paper, Girin Beeharry challenges this architecture to think about our role, responsibility, and focus in efforts to meet the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) on education.

Let us be clear: we will not meet SDG 4. We are nine years out and data forecasts that none of the 10 education-related SDGs is likely to be met. This was the case even before COVID-19 resulted in global school closures and set progress further back. I remember being at the World Education Forum in 2015, sitting in the bar and hearing the stories of the sherpas trying their very hardest to get everything into the Education 2030 Framework for Action. There was a sense of achievement then that "learning" was back at the heart of the education agenda.[2] But while the word might have been, the action required was not.

Six years later, Girin proposes a way for the global education aid community to act on this: to make foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) the priority. He does not suggest that such a global focus will be a fix for all education problems, nor that global

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education aid actors are "the" most important group. But he does suggest that global actors have a role to play, and that our collective action can contribute a piece of the puzzle.

So, to Girin's question of whether I agree with the need for a focus on FLN, I say "yes." The logic of focusing on one goal is sound: with a huge set of challenges and a limited budget,[3] it is not possible to do everything at once. It makes sense to focus on foundational learning out of all of the education goals. The benefits of basic literacy and numeracy are higher than we had imagined. Children who can read, write, and count have a stronger foundation to progress to more complicated subjects and skills. Children who don't learn are more likely to drop out, so access and learning goals are intertwined, even though policy responses to access do not necessarily lead to children learning. Learning to read can mean simultaneously learning to problem solve, to work in teams, and to think critically.

I am slightly more optimistic than Girin on the question of whether the global education aid architecture is up to the task of focusing on FLN. While I do not think it realistic that every global education aid actor can or will sign up to this focus, I think there is significant alignment among some of the biggest funders and—crucially—those who (Crawfurd et al., forthcoming) ministry of education officials describe as influential in-country. A small group of people representing the World Bank; the Global Partnership for Education; UNICEF; UNESCO, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); and USAID are enthusiastic about the potential of the Foundational Learning Compact to focus efforts. Girin and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation education team played a significant role in bringing these actors and this focus together. Yes, there is still debate and push back; yes, significant funds will continue to be spent on other priorities; yes, this is a tiny group of people—but there is palpable excitement in virtual meeting rooms about

the momentum from this. It is stronger alignment than I've known in my career, which started in the heady days after the Paris Declaration. Back then, I worked for an African ministry of education and wrote a paper for a local education group called "Business Unusual," challenging local donors to support problem and priority identification with the government, and to work together. Fifteen years later and, who knows, perhaps such alignment could happen. Timing is good: there is a window of opportunity post COVID-related school closures to recognise low student learning levels and not to blame the failing school systems.

I could end my response now, in agreement with Girin. But. . . I have a four "buts":

But - FLN is only a starting line; we need a sequence of priorities

FLN is a good focus but it is not a good goal. It is, in fact, a pitiful goal. We are talking here about reaching for children being able to read a simple story by age 10. What Girin is asking for is to get to the starting line. I would push the global aid architecture further to set out a sequenced forecast or priorities (and, in so doing, build buy-in amongst those for whom FLN isn't their immediate priority, but who can see "their" priority coming up). What would this be? FLN for the mass of students in-school then ... target those who still remain out-of-school? Early childhood education? Then (while student learning gains at the primary level are emerging, and work ongoing but with less concentrated focus on secondary, technical, and higher education) a push upwards from primary? Ministers of education and finance around the world would value a broad roadmap that suggests sequences of priorities for different places in different contexts.

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3. Campaigners for education finance estimate that $200 billion per year is needed to fill the education financing gap in low- and lower-middle-income countries (Save Our Future 2020). Only around 10 percent of domestic education budgets is movable, most spent on teacher salaries. In a chicken-and-egg argument, this is all unlikely to change until we can show that investment in education can yield better returns.

But - achieving FLN will be an uphill battle; we need more success stories

It may be a pitiful starting line but universal FLN is going to be incredibly difficult to achieve. The phrase "global learning crisis" is used widely in documents and meetings, but there seems to me to be little understanding by most of how far off we are. Learning profiles are flat in a lot of places, and there are few examples of these improving at the scale and pace we want to see. For example, RISE teams picked seven massive ambitious reforms and over the past six years tracked these; while there are some successes, the overall message is that learning gains are slow. The Learning at Scale team sought eight examples of proven success to explore what happened; even finding the positive case studies was hard. We scour just a handful of examples for lessons on how political incentives, state capability and citizen demand align around learning as an education goal. So there is a double case for focusing on FLN: it is a sensible starting point, and it requires concentrated effort.

That it requires such effort is somewhat confounding. For it is not the case that we do not know what works to improve learning (as narrative had it in 2015). We have a wealth of knowledge from OECD countries on how to teach children to read, write, and count. The literature on why learning gains in lower- and lower-middle-income countries are low and slow is small—though growing with new work on the politics of education reform. But reflections on why reforms did not work as expected are too often shared in the last two minutes of a conference presentation, after the hard data. Why didn't a project to hire contract teachers produce the same learning gains at large scale after being successful at small scale? Why did a school management project get scaled up when it hadn't produced learning gains at small scale? Reflections, given anecdotally by researchers, education practitioners, aid donors and candid government officials, conclude that a lot comes down to politics and implementation failure.

The RISE programme proposes that learning gains will come when incentives within education systems are shifted from being "coherent for access" to being "coherent for learning." This can make it sound easy. What constitutes coherence? When are enough actors aligned to make a difference? From the perspective of Girin's paper, what role can the education aid community play in supporting or prompting such coherence? In one country I worked with, donors were actually incredibly aligned and proposed a series of reforms to teach children at the right level, to provide additional specialist support to children with disabilities, and to improve the quality of early childhood education. While the government incorporated these objectives into the education sector plan and agreed to a series of targets against which aid funding would be released, in practice these reforms did not move. We don't have formal evidence of why, but at one of my regular, informal, over-cheesecake chats with a senior official, he mused that the political will was not there amongst all those who held decision making power, that those in the implementing institutions did not have the technical capability to make the changes, and that there was insufficient public (and teacher) clamour for these reforms—indeed parents were particularly wary of the Teaching at the Right Level approach, with its move away from a rote-learning approach, because they expected their children to recite the demonstrated knowledge that comes from rote learning. We aligned donors hadn't tackled the incentive structures and accountability relationships.

But — "what" isn't enough; we need to focus on practical questions of "how"

Alignment of global education aid actors on FLN may help with priority setting but won't get around these politics and implementation failure issues. But when ministers of education and finance are asking for ideas and support on how to raise student learning outcomes, it will not be enough to say "focus on foundational learning." Girin's proposition must be taken

further, to urge global education aid donors to support particular approaches proven to help children read, write, and count (as, indeed, the Gates Foundation has done) and to iterate in applying these approaches in new contexts. The FLN agenda is going to need some concrete, practical messages on what to do.

For example, to achieve FLN, basic education systems will need to shift to teach at the level of the child. This is the message that is coming through loudest and clearest from the evidence base (such as in the recent Smart Buys report). But what does it actually mean in practice? What do governments and practitioners need to do? There are some very practical tools being developed to support governments that want to take this approach (these and these on structured pedagogy stand out). But there must be nuance with this practical support: global education aid actors will need to be careful not to give the message that structured pedagogy is a quick fix. Or that reforming curriculum, teacher training, and learning content all at once is an easy—or necessarily possible—ask.

The other strong practical recommendation might be to invest in data generation, in particular of learning profiles. It is currently too easy to deny the scale of the problem. Providing information on the benefits of education is one of the most cost-effective ways to improve education outcomes, but this information needs to be specific and context-relevant. For FLN to become the core of the global education agenda, regular and reliable data generated through national data systems needs to tell the story clearly of who is not learning the basics, how far off they are, and point to why. This story is starting to emerge, from UNESCO's efforts to generate more, and more accurate, learning data; from the World Bank's generation of proxies of education system performance; from RISE analysis of learning profiles; and from CGD's linking of learning, teacher, and education administration data. Data systems are not an excuse but a fundamental building block of accountable education systems; so let's fund them.

But - global aid alignment is just one piece of the puzzle; we also need to work differently

Girin's paper is third in a series of challenges to the global education aid architecture published in the *International Journal of Educational Development*, after Nick Burnett's in 2019 and Keith Lewin's in 2020. All three are right to critique and challenge the global education aid architecture. I agree with the thrust of all three, in particular with Nick's conclusion that even though fixing the architecture would not solve all global education issues, it could result in better allocation of funding and "would be an important step that could make a real difference." Alignment of messaging is broadly a good thing, and can help with improving the focus of both aid and domestic financing, as Keith Lewin calls for. But it will only ever go so far—there will always be multiple and contradictory pressures at play, making the alignment of a small group of actors on one message an achievement in itself. Even among the small group willing to focus on FLN, there is debate about which forum to use as a coordination mechanism; such squabbling is unhelpful.

But clearly a focus on FLN is not going to fix the education aid architecture, and it is not going to result in dramatic learning gains by itself. The large literature on the geopolitics of aid and development tempers expectations. Global aid actors can tinker at the edges of the various complex systems within which we work but cannot control change or buy outcomes. Education aid actors can nudge incentives to prioritise foundational learning or, when incentives in a country are already aligned, can add funding, or voice, or influence to boost potential for progress.

I think that one way to achieve what Girin is pitching for is for some among the global education aid architecture to start seeing themselves (to borrow from Duncan Green) not as architects and engineers, but as "ecosystem gardeners," to make change happen. This means working in a different way. And there is good news: this is possible through new or planned

vehicles if used well. In countries where there is strong demand to tackle foundational learning, investment cases linked to the World Bank's Foundational Learning Compact are intended to create a country-specific picture of how to achieve learning gains. GPE capacity grants can support deep diagnostics to test the fundamental assumptions about why student learning isn't happening and improve national data systems to track the effectiveness of implementation. FCDO, USAID, UNESCO, and UNICEF aim to coordinate inputs from their respective vehicles for supporting a new culture of evidence in education, whereby research is co-created with government and implementers, and strong feedback loops are in place to ensure that implementation failures are fixed (to the extent possible) along the way.

In a push for progress on FLN, global aid actors will need to balance ambition for results with an iterative and politically astute approach. A group within the global education aid community have tried in recent years to see if support to local problem identification could help to work out why children are not learning and point to what might be done in that particular context. The conclusion was that education system diagnostics are not a quick tool to give an easy answer but that the dialogue has been useful. I would challenge those using the phrase "education system" to pursue FLN through education's shift to a "problem-driven iterative adaptation" or "doing development differently" approach. In this, we might start to understand better some of the perennial "why" issues.

A final thought

One thing that makes me nervous about recommendations focusing on the global education aid architecture, no matter how much I agree with them, is the risk of depicting a "them" and "us" division between aid funders and aid recipient national governments. The political ethnographer part of me, who thinks a lot about the politics of aid, and the colonial historian in me, who traced 19th century investment into Ashanti curriculum, is wary of a simplistic "global" versus "national" narrative. The politics of aid is a dance; donors do not hold all of the power. Donors are not a homogenous group, any more than aid recipients are. In cohering around the FLN agenda, to the extent that this is possible, the global aid architecture should be careful that this does not become a "global" agenda. The "them" versus "us" aid relationship can become oppositional and have perverse consequences.

Alignment on a clear first-order priority, FLN, would be a good thing. But there is a much wider global education community out there who need to align on this message. This is not a conversation for us among the global aid architecture. We can do some good things—like stop arguing the sub-issues, invest in data, facilitate conversations, and join the dots. We have got responsibility and power and good intentions. But let's not give the impression that we can fix this, or that it is "their" problem.