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# Toward Universal Learning

A Global Framework for Measuring Learning

## Executive Summary



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Report No. 2 of 3  
Learning Metrics Task Force  
Executive Summary  
July 2013





## Executive Summary

# Toward Universal Learning

A Global Framework for Measuring Learning



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*Toward Universal Learning: A Global Framework for Measuring Learning* is the second in a series of three reports from the Learning Metrics Task Force. In the first report, *Toward Universal Learning: What Every Child Should Learn*, the task force identified the competencies, knowledge or areas of learning that are important for all children and youth to master in order to succeed in school and life. A third and final report will address how the measurement of learning can be implemented to improve education quality.

This report represents the collaborative work of the Learning Metrics Task Force's members and their respective organizations, a technical working group convened by the task force's Secretariat, and more than 600 individuals around the world who provided feedback on the recommendations. See the main technical report for a full list of consultation participants.

This is a joint publication of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution. Any citation of this report should include specific reference to both organizations. The following is a suggested citation:

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## About the Learning Metrics Task Force

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution joined efforts to convene the Learning Metrics Task Force. The overarching objective of the project is to catalyze a shift in the global conversation on education from a focus on access to access *plus* learning. Based on recommendations from technical working groups and input from broad global consultations, the task force works to ensure that learning becomes a central component of the post-2015 global development agenda and to make recommendations for common goals to improve learning opportunities and outcomes for children and youth worldwide. To learn more, visit [www.brookings.edu/learningmetrics](http://www.brookings.edu/learningmetrics).

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## The UNESCO Institute for Statistics

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## The Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution

The Center for Universal Education (CUE) at the Brookings Institution is one of the leading policy centers focused on universal quality education in the developing world. CUE develops and disseminates effective solutions to achieve equitable learning, and plays a critical role in influencing the development of new international education policies and in transforming them into actionable strategies for governments, civil society and private enterprise. The Center for Universal Education is engaged in four broad areas: influencing the global education to 2015 and beyond; improving education resources and learning outcomes; advancing quality education for the marginalized; and promoting collaboration between diverse stakeholders in the education sector.

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# Abbreviations and Acronyms

ASER	Annual Status of Education Report
CONFEMEN	Conférence des ministres de l'Éducation des pays ayant le français en partage
CoP	community of practice
CUE	Center for Universal Education
EDI	early development instrument
EFA	Education for All
EGMA	Early Grade Math Assessment
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment
GER	gross enrollment ratio
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
ICCS	International Civic and Citizenship Education Study
IEA	International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement
INEE	Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
LAMP	Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme
LLECE	Laboratorio Latinoamericano de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación
LMTF	Learning Metrics Task Force
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
NAC	National Assessment Center
NER	net enrollment rate
NIR	net intake rate
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OLA	Out-of-School Youth Literacy Assessment
PASEC	Programme d'Analyse des Systèmes Éducatifs de la CONFEMEN
PIAAC	Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
SABER	Systems Approach for Better Educational Results
SACMEQ	Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Cultural and Scientific Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund



# Introduction

The benefits of education—for national development, individual prosperity, health and social stability—are well known, but for these benefits to accrue children in school have to be learning. Despite commitments and progress in improving access to education at the global level, including Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 on universal primary education and the Education for All (EFA) Goals, levels of learning are still too low. According to estimates in the 2012 EFA Global Monitoring Report, at least 250 million primary-school-age children around the world are not able to read, write or count well enough to meet minimum learning standards, including those children who have spent at least four years in school (UNESCO 2012). Worse still, we may not know the full scale of the crisis: this figure is likely to be an underestimate because measurement of learning outcomes among children and youth is limited and, relative to the measurement of access, more difficult to assess at the global level.

To advance progress for children and youth around the world, it is critical that learning is recognized as essential for human development. As EFA and the MDGs sunset in 2015, and the UN Secretary-General promotes the Global Education First initiative, the education sector has a unique window of opportunity to raise awareness of international education goals and ensure that learning becomes a central component of the global development agenda. To do this, the global education community must work together to define global ambition on improving learning and propose practical actions to deliver and measure progress.

In response to this need, 30 organizations have come together to form the Learning Metrics Task Force,

co-convened by UNESCO through its Institute for Statistics (UIS) and the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at the Brookings Institution. The overarching objective of the project is to catalyze a shift in the global conversation on education from a focus on access to access *plus* learning. Based on recommendations of technical working groups and input from broad global consultations, the task force aims to make recommendations to help countries and international organizations measure and improve learning outcomes for children and youth worldwide. The task force—comprised of representatives of national and regional governments, EFA-convening agencies, regional political bodies, civil society organizations, and donor agencies—is engaged in an 18-month-long process to build consensus around three essential questions addressed in the following order:

- Phase I: What learning is important for all children and youth?
- Phase II: How should learning outcomes be measured?
- Phase III: How can measurement of learning improve education quality?

In the first report of the *Toward Universal Learning* series, the task force put forth a framework of learning domains that are important for all children and youth to master in order to succeed in school and life (LMTF 2013). Building upon the seven domains of learning identified in Phase I, this second report provides guidance on how learning outcomes should be measured, including recommendations for six areas to be tracked globally as well as suggestions for significantly improving assessment capacity at the national level. The third and final report will address issues of implementation, with recommendations to ensure that measurement informs action to improve learning.

# Building Consensus on Measurement at the Global Level

The Education for All goals initiated in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, demonstrated a commitment to meeting basic learning needs. This commitment was restated in 2000 in the Dakar Framework for Action, in which Goal 6 calls for: “improving every aspect of the quality of education, and ensuring their excellence so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.”

Measurement can play a crucial role in improving education quality and learning. Effective teachers measure learning in the classroom to adjust and individualize instruction. Good head teachers, school administrators and school district leaders measure learning at the school and community levels to target resources and improve school quality. National governments measure learning to diagnose the overall health of the national education system and develop policies to improve learning outcomes. Civil society actors, donors, and development agencies use assessments to measure the effectiveness of programming and advocate for effective education policies and practices.

Nevertheless, the connection between measurement and the improvement of learning is neither automatic nor simple; different approaches to measurement are useful for different purposes. For measurement to be effective, it must be fit for the purpose. Large-scale measurement should not be implemented for its own sake, but rather to make an impact on policy that ulti-

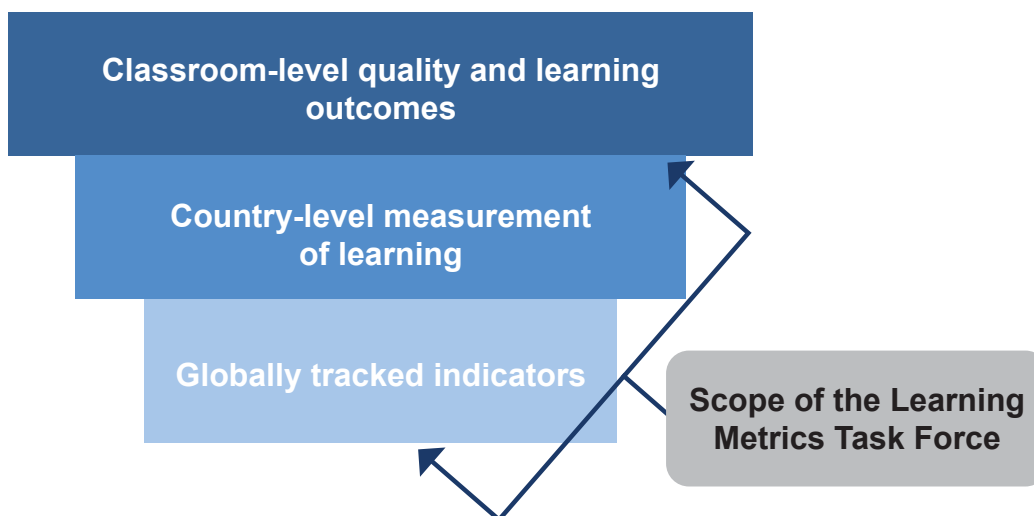
mately leads to improvements in learning. Large-scale measurement of learning can be used (1) to identify and determine the magnitude of potential problems; (2) to track progress; (3) to inform interventions; and (4) to inform parents and the community in general about the status of education and thereby inform public debates. Every assessment effort can be designed to give priority to some of these purposes over others. Therefore, no single approach to measuring learning is better than any other; rather, the choices about what and how to measure should be informed by the needs of those who require the information.

While measurement may have different purposes at different levels, the systems for measuring and improving learning at the classroom, national and global levels should not work in isolation. Globally tracked indicators should be aligned with what is measured nationally, and in turn measurement at the national level should be aligned with the competencies measured in schools and classrooms. As a global consensus-building effort, the Learning Metrics Task Force convened to support progress toward EFA Goal 6 by focusing on measuring learning at the global and national levels. While the task force recognizes that learning measured at the subnational and local levels is critical, those levels are beyond the scope of this 18-month project. Figure 1 illustrates how these different levels coexist and where the work of the LMTF is focused.

## The Consensus-Building Process

In Phase I of the project, the Standards Working Group convened from May to October 2012 to make recommendations on what learning competencies are important for children and youth to master to succeed in school and life. The Standards Working Group circulated prototype recommendations for public consultation from August through September 2012 and

**Figure 1. Relationship between Classroom, School, Country, and Global-Level Measurement of Learning**



modified them based on feedback from more than 500 individuals in 57 countries. A draft framework was presented to the task force at a two day in-person meeting in September 2012. Over these two days, the LMTF finalized a framework to be used by the subsequent working group on measures and methods to investigate the measurement of learning outcomes. The Standards Working Group was tasked with developing a framework for learning outcomes that would not be restricted to those outcomes that lend themselves easily to measurement and are, as a result, currently prioritized.

In Phase II of the project, the task force considered approaches for measuring and tracking progress in learning at the global and national levels, drawing on the framework put forth in Phase I. The Measures and Methods Working Group—comprised of 57 experts in education, learning assessment and other relevant fields—provided technical guidance and recommenda-

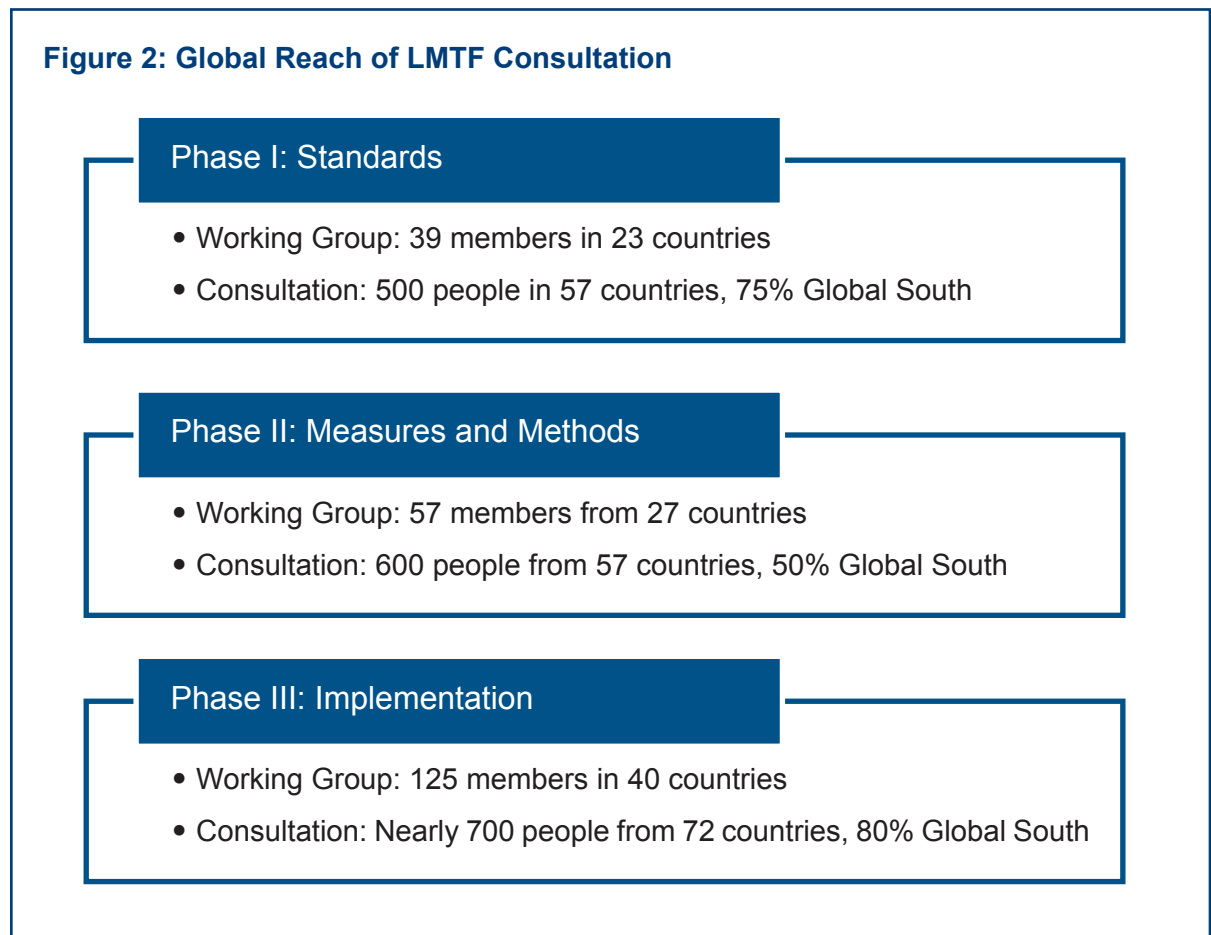
tions for the task force to consider. In addition, more than 600 individuals in 57 countries around the world submitted comments on the initial draft of recommendations through a wide-ranging public consultation process.

On February 20-21, 2013, the working group presented its recommendations to the task force at a meeting in Dubai hosted by Dubai Cares. Among the 44 attendees were representatives of low-, middle- and high-income countries; stakeholders from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North and South America, and Oceania; key UN and multilateral agencies; regional bodies; teacher organizations; civil society organizations; and bilateral donor agencies. This report describes the decisions reached by the task force at that meeting.

The third and final phase of the project began in March 2013 with the launch of the Implementation Working

Group. This working group presented its recommendations to the task force in July 2013, and the results of that meeting will be published in the final report of the *Toward Universal Learning* series. Figure 2 below

shows the global reach of the working groups and consultation participants. See the full technical report for a comprehensive list of Phase II consultation participants.



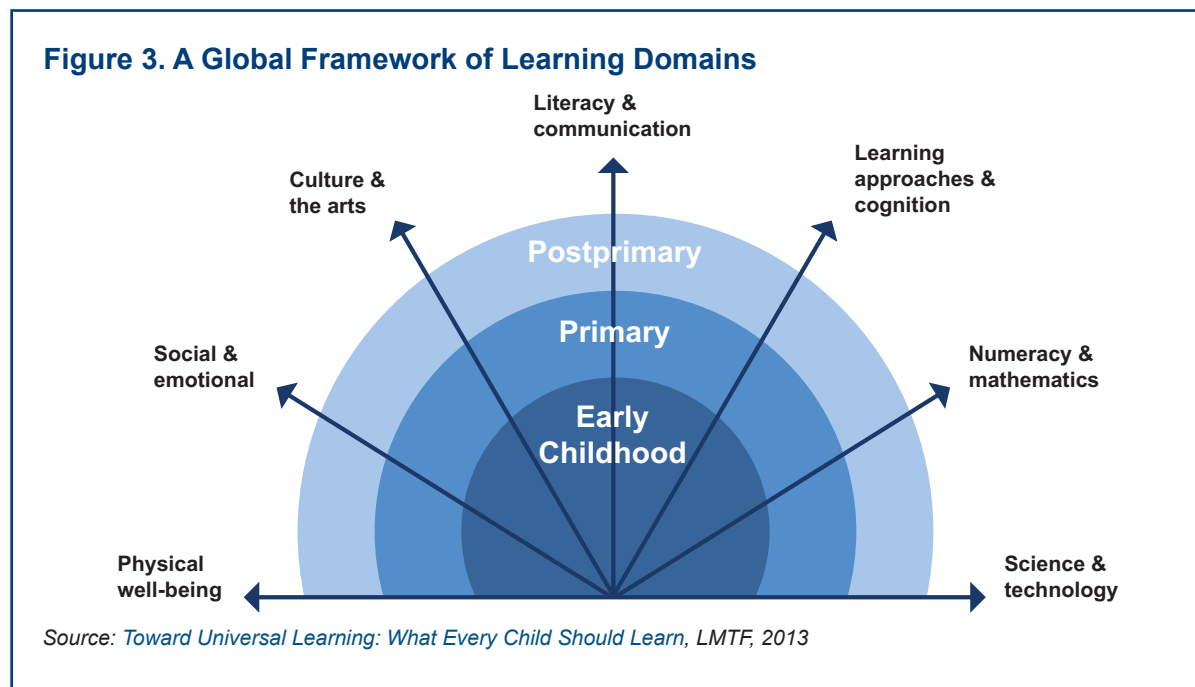
# What Learning Is Important for All Children and Youth?

Phase I of the project sought to answer the question, What do all children and youth need to learn in order to succeed in a globalized society? Considering recommendations from a working group of experts, the task force decided that, indeed, there were important competencies that all children and youth should master no matter where they live in the world. The first report from the task force, *Toward Universal Learning: What Every Child Should Learn*, presents a broad, holistic framework of seven learning domains (see figure 3), with corresponding subdomains, as the aspiration for all children and youth around the world (LMTF 2013).

This framework was developed based on:

- Existing global policies and dialogues, such as EFA and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which mandate a broad definition of education and learning.
- Research supporting the importance of learning in these domains for different areas of people's lives, including economic growth and material prosperity.
- Results from global public consultation, in which more than 500 individuals in 57 countries provided feedback. The overwhelming majority of participants in the global consultation, especially those from the Global South, argued for a broad definition of learning that goes beyond basic literacy and numeracy.

See *Toward Universal Learning: What Every Child Should Learn* for a full description of the seven domains and the methodology behind the framework.



As a next step, the task force agreed that the subsequent working group on measures and methods should investigate ways to measure learning in all seven domains and at each of the three stages (early childhood, primary and lower secondary), and make recommendations on the feasibility and desirability of measuring learning at the global level. Lower secondary was selected as the upper end of the task force's scope due to the complex areas of specialization that occur beyond that level. The task force also charged the Measures and Methods Working Group with proposing a hybrid model for measuring learning, with some of the competencies in the seven domains to be measured at the global level and others to be considered at the national level.

## A Global Framework for Measuring Learning

In developing recommendations for a global framework for measuring learning, the task force sought to avoid a “one-size-fits-all” approach by making recommendations that would inform global policy dialogues while also remaining relevant to national education goals. The following six areas of measurement were identified for tracking at the global level to fill the global data gap on learning. The first two areas capture inputs into the learning process, and the subsequent four describe demonstrable learning outcomes.

The task force recognizes that significant improvements in assessment capacity would be required at the national level before all six areas could be measured.

While curricula in many countries encompass all of the seven domains identified in Phase I—perhaps under different nomenclature or categorization—measurement of learning is not equally developed in each of the domains. In selecting the six areas for global measurement, one criterion the working group and task force took into account was the current feasibility of measuring within the seven domains and corresponding sub-domains. Feasibility, as noted below, varies across the six areas. For instance, access and completion indicators are tracked almost universally, while other areas, such as breadth of learning opportunities, are much less developed and not currently tracked at the global level. The rationale and feasibility is described for each of the six areas below.

### **1) Access to and completion of learning opportunities.**

*Rationale:* Tracking progress in access and completion of learning opportunities addresses the unfinished access agenda for out-of-school children and youth. It also allows for a broad definition of schooling, including criteria based on intentional learning programs, whether formal or nonformal. These programs occur when individuals intentionally or voluntarily search for knowledge, skills, competencies or attitudes of lasting value, and that intention is formulated by the learner before starting the activity (European Commission 2006). Evidence shows that the skills and knowledge needed to participate in a global economy are rarely learned outside intentional learning activities.

*Feasibility:* This is currently measured in most countries, although the quality of data could be improved.

### **2) Exposure to a breadth of learning opportunities across all seven learning domains.**

*Rationale:* In Phase I, the task force identified seven domains of learning necessary for success in school and life. An even broader set of competencies is necessary at the national and local levels; however, the task force recommends that national curriculum, teacher training, and potentially instructional practices be mapped in relation to the seven domains where possible.

*Feasibility:* There is currently no measure at the global level to track breadth of learning opportunities, and thus a new measure would need to be developed.

### **3) Early childhood experiences that promote development and learning in multiple domains.**

*Rationale:* The early childhood years are critical to later learning and development. Entry to primary school is a key milestone in a child's learning trajectory, and measuring competencies across multiple domains at this point or in the years before entry to primary can help drive improvements in preprimary education, health, family services, and other sectors serving young children. Since child development is influenced by multiple domains, a holistic measure across several domains is the best way to capture learning at this stage. This typically includes aspects of learning related to five of the seven domains: physical well-being, social and emotional, literacy and communication, learning approaches and cognition, and numeracy and mathematics.

*Feasibility:* At present, several countries and regions use measures of children's learning at entry into primary or in the years immediately before. While one measure has not been adopted globally, there are options for both country-level and global measurement (see the full technical report for details on these op-

tions). To reach global coverage with one measure, additional validation and scaling would be needed.

### **4) The ability to read a variety of texts.**

*Rationale:* Children and youth must be able to communicate in their mother tongue and in the primary language of instruction. The foundational skills necessary for learning to read are critical to functioning in modern society, in addition to the ability to comprehend and analyze complex texts through a variety of media. This area encompasses both primary and lower secondary levels.

*Feasibility:* Most countries use some measure of reading at the national or subnational level, and some countries participate in internationally comparable assessments of reading skills.

### **5) The ability to use numbers and apply this knowledge to real-life situations.**

*Rationale:* Children must be able to count and understand mathematical concepts, both to make informed choices in life and to pursue advanced learning in such disciplines as science, engineering, economics, research and technology. This measurement area encompasses both the primary and lower secondary levels.

*Feasibility:* Many countries use some measure of numeracy and mathematics at the national or subnational level, and some countries participate in internationally comparable assessments.

### **6) An adaptable, flexible skill set to meet the demands of the 21st century.**

*Rationale:* There are a variety of skills across the

seven domains that children and youth need to succeed as global citizens beyond reading and numeracy. A measure of these types of skills administered in lower secondary school could include environmental awareness, collaborative problem solving, information and computer technology (ICT) digital skills, social responsibility or other subdomains.

*Feasibility:* Measurement of these skills is emerging, and some components are currently measured on a small scale. However, a new measure or composite of measures would need to be developed to track progress at the global level.

## Supporting National Capacity and Decisionmaking

The task force recognizes that a system of global measurement will only be effective in improving learning outcomes if there is a strong commitment to improving national and classroom-level assessment. To make the connection between measurement of learning and improved education quality and create opportunities for innovation in learning assessment, countries must be supported in obtaining the financial, technical and political resources to measure learning and in using the data to improve learning outcomes.

Many efforts are underway to assess learning at the national, regional and international levels; more than 150 countries currently measure learning levels through national assessments and examinations or participate in international, regional or cross-national

assessment initiatives (UNESCO/UIS 2012). Some countries might work to improve their national-level practices as a step along the way toward participating in internationally comparable assessments.

The Measures and Methods Working Group proposed the establishment of a global mechanism—such as an international multi-stakeholder advisory group—to meet this objective. The task force agreed to explore the feasibility of such a mechanism to fill the global data gap on learning by tracking progress against learning in the six areas identified above, and to support countries in building capacity for measuring learning.

### Country-Level Communities of Practice

To drive country-level reform, the Measures and Methods Working Group proposed the establishment or expansion of existing communities of practice (CoP) as a mechanism to mobilize stakeholders to improve national assessment systems. An inclusive country-level CoP would include education ministry officials, national assessment experts, civil society groups, and organizations representing teachers, parents, students and other key stakeholders. Its role would be to review teaching and learning in the seven learning domains, propose national priorities for learning, examine the effectiveness of current measures and recommend others if needed.

The CoP, with support from regional organizations and an international multi-stakeholder advisory group, could also be mobilized to improve classroom assessments, national examinations and assessments used for evaluations of specific programs that are not necessarily administered to a nationally representative sample. In some countries, there is already a national group proposed or fulfilling the role of the CoP. See the full technical report for specific examples.



## Support from the International Community

To support country-level CoPs and track progress at the global level, the working group proposed a multi-stakeholder advisory group that would connect countries with resources and technical assistance to help decide which domains to measure, how to measure them and how to implement assessments. This group would complement and work closely with existing agencies currently working on global education data (e.g., UIS, GMR and GPE) and improving student assessments (e.g., PISA, PIRLS, TIMSS, PASEQ, SAQMEC, and LLECE). A possible function of such a group would be to coordinate with regional educational organizations (e.g., the Arab League of Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization [ALECSO], Association for Education Development in Africa [ADEA], Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos [OEI], South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation [SAARC] and Southeast Asian Minister of Education Organization [SEAMEO]) and, as appropriate, provide or link to resources to support learning measurement at the country level. The Implementation Working Group and task force are investigating the feasibility of this type of group and will provide recommendations for the scope and functions of the proposed group.

## Using Data to Improve Learning Equity

All children and youth should have equal opportunity to learn the skills and knowledge required to succeed in school and life, regardless of:

- the country in which they were born;
- the community in which they grow up;
- their gender;
- their family's income level; and/or
- their physical or mental health status.

The task force agreed that a focus on learning must include a concomitant focus on equity, with particular attention to rising inequality within countries. Aggregate reports of learning outcomes at the country level can be useful for comparisons across countries, but more nuanced information is also needed to improve learning outcomes for the most marginalized children and youth. Because education is a universal aspiration and right, measures of access and learning at any level (global, national and subnational) should reveal information about aggregate measures of overall conditions (e.g., enrollment, achievement), as well as disparities between student subpopulations.

Measuring and tracking progress over time will allow for global recognition of countries that are successful in improving levels of learning and reducing disparities between subpopulations. To ensure that interventions reach the most marginalized children and youth, countries must also collect data on sociodemographic dimensions, such as the following: sex; age; residence area (urban/rural); income level and socioeconomic status; poverty and extreme poverty status; mother tongue; ethnicity; regions within a country; citizenship status; disabilities; and emergency or catastrophe (natural or human-made) situations. Each country has the responsibility to identify which dimensions are particularly relevant in their own context and to design measurements and interventions that take these variables into account.

## Beyond School-Based Metrics

Despite significant progress in recent decades, universal access to primary schooling is not yet a reality. Many task force members, working group members, and consultation participants voiced strong support for including out-of-school children and youth within task force recommendations for measuring learning.

A large proportion of out-of-school children and youth live in poverty, conflict and/or disaster contexts and other hard-to-reach areas. Although not enrolled in formal education systems, these children face daily challenges that require them to use higher order thinking skills to solve problems, make critical decisions, learn persistence and think creatively—skills that are essential for their survival. In such contexts children must also develop leadership skills, awareness of their environments and the dangers that surround them, and knowledge of local culture and customs. Countries and regions would benefit from measuring and recognizing the considerable skills of these children within the domains of social and emotional skills, learning and cognition, science and technology, and culture and the arts. As learning takes place both inside and outside formal school settings, household-based assessments with sound sampling and testing procedures would ensure that learning levels of out-of-school children are measured and taken into account.

## Considering Multiple Methods

As explained earlier, no assessment is intrinsically better than another: a good assessment is one that is fit for purpose. The task force agreed that rigorous assessment of learning may take multiple forms, including standardized assessments that are administered

in one or more countries, internationally comparable assessments, national exams and assessments, and household-based surveys. Multiple methods should be considered when designing systems to assess learning opportunities and outcomes.

Regardless of which methods are used, measurement should be conducted in a technically sound, robust manner. Weak data can be misleading and result in the misalignment of policies and resources. This does not mean that measurement efforts at early stages (when validity and reliability claims are not yet clear) should be discarded, but rather reinforces the need to strengthen assessments and to use the information they generate with the utmost care.

There was also considerable debate among task force and working group members about how data are produced, managed and used. While education statistics systems and national and international statistics are public goods (i.e., funded with public resources to serve a public purpose), this is not always the case for learning assessments. The task force decided that it could not recommend a global goal for learning that would require countries to buy into a specific brand of assessment.

## Education and the Global Development Agenda

The objectives of the LMTF include ensuring that learning is included in the post-2015 development framework and proposing indicators that can be used

to track progress toward the global goals to be identified through the post-2015 process. The report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (SG HLPEP), released in May 2013, provides a framework for bringing together the international community's human development and sustainable development efforts. This report is one input in the longer process of crafting the next global development agenda post-2015. Notably, it included a clear focus on education with the recommendation to measure progress using global measurements of access and learning outcomes at the primary and secondary levels (SG HLPEP 2013).

While the task force will continue working to integrate its recommendations in post-2015 discussions, members also agreed that regardless of how education and learning are incorporated into the next round of development goals, the global education community should take the necessary actions to improve learning levels for all children and youth worldwide, including filling the global data gap on learning by tracking the six areas of measurement recommended by the task force.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

Measuring learning outcomes is a crucial step in ensuring that every child, everywhere, is able to realize their right to good-quality education and become a productive global citizen. The education sector has successfully rallied to get millions more children into school and is raising awareness that education means learning, not just schooling. However, there is still much work to be done for education stakeholders to adequately measure and track success at the global level.

This report provides a global vision for how learning should be measured around the world. Education is everyone's responsibility, not solely that of the government. Therefore, the measurement of learning outcomes must be led and supported by everyone who has a stake in ensuring that all children learn in addition to government, including students, teachers, parents, civil society, the private sector and a variety of other actors. In some cases, this begins with a shift in the national dialogue on education from access to access *plus* learning. In other cases, where learning outcomes are already being measured and discussed in the public forum, the national dialogue may shift to focus on learning outcomes that are relevant for a globalized economy. Regardless of the "culture of evaluation" in a given country, there are steps that the education stakeholders can take to improve the measurement of learning outcomes and ultimately to improve learning levels.

The final phase of the LMTF project will address this crucial question: How can learning measurement be translated into policies and practices that result in improvements in learning? The Implementation Working Group will consider task force recommendations to date within their own country contexts and those in which they work to explore the feasibility of tracking learning globally in the six areas. It will also determine the resources that would be required, from both within and outside the country, to implement robust systems of learning assessments that are globally informed yet nationally relevant.

The task force met in July 2013 at the Rockefeller Center in Bellagio, Italy to consider the proposal of the Implementation Working Group, and the final report will be released in November 2013, outlining a way forward for national and international actors.

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