

FOUNDATIONS FIRST

MAXIMISING THE UK'S IMPACT IN ADDRESSING
THE LEARNING CRISIS



RESULTS

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COVER PICTURE: Girls study reading early in the morning in a local school in Parwan, Afghanistan. Image: UNDP / Sayed Omer

RESULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Receiving an education which provides children with the platform they need to realise their potential, is every child's inalienable right. Learning to read, write and do maths is an essential and transformative component of this for most children. It has the power to change the prospects of both the individual and the communities they live in.

The UK Government has stated its ambition to be a 'force for good in the world'¹. As part of this, it has emphasised its commitment to advancing global progress on girls' education, and ending the global learning crisis whereby the majority of children in low- and middle-income countries leave school without achieving minimum levels of literacy and numeracy².

Despite its ambitions, much of the UK's global education work is having little impact on improving learning outcomes for children in reading, writing and maths on a significant scale. This paper sets out a plan for the UK to transform its impact on what is termed foundational literacy and numeracy, the basic skills in reading, writing and maths which provide the building blocks for future learning.

This roadmap is based around three core action tracks which call for the UK to:

1

**FOCUS BILATERAL EDUCATION OFFICIAL
DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE (ODA) ON
FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING**

2

**SUPPORT EFFECTIVE, LOCALLY-DRIVEN
SYSTEMS OF EDUCATION**

3

**ENGAGE STRATEGICALLY WITH BILATERAL
AND MULTILATERAL PARTNERS TO DRIVE
FOCUS ON FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING**

Within each action track are a series of specific policy recommendations ranging in focus and specificity:

ACTION TRACK 1 calls for the UK to better prioritise literacy and numeracy in its global education work, improve data collection for measurement of impact on foundational learning outcomes, widen targeting of UK official development assistance (ODA) for basic education, and scale-up ambition for UK financing of initiatives to tackle the learning crisis.

ACTION TRACK 2 calls for the UK to prioritise support for teachers and education systems so they are equipped to effectively teach reading, writing and maths, collaborate with partner governments to improve education policy adaptation and iteration, and better integrate local actors and expertise into UK education ODA programming.

ACTION TRACK 3 focuses on improving UK bilateral and multilateral engagement on foundational learning. There is an opportunity for the UK Government to amplify its voice calling for greater global ambition in addressing the learning crisis, holding multilateral organisations to account on their work to improve foundational skills, and encouraging other countries to follow suit. Education Cannot Wait's (ECW) upcoming replenishment is a crucial juncture for the UK to step up its financing for ECW's work to protect the foundational learning of children in emergencies and protracted crises.

The UK Government's growing awareness of the learning crisis and the several new initiatives it is actively involved with provides a strong basis to build upon. This report seeks to outline the opportunities for the UK to maximise its role in ending the learning crisis and achieve its stated ambition of being a part of global efforts to 'to get all children into school and learning'³.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
DFID	Department for International Development
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECW	Education Cannot Wait
EQUIP-T	Education Quality Improvement Programme in Tanzania
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
GDP	Gross domestic product
GNI	Gross national income
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
ICAI	Independent Commission for Aid Impact
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ODA	Official development assistance
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
UK	United Kingdom
RISE	Research on Improving Systems of Education Programme
RTI	Research Triangle Institute International
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SD	Standard deviation
TaRL	Teaching at the right level
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

RECOMMENDATIONS

MAXIMISING THE UK'S IMPACT IN ADDRESSING THE LEARNING CRISIS



1

**FOCUS BILATERAL
EDUCATION OFFICIAL
DEVELOPMENT
ASSISTANCE (ODA) ON
FOUNDATIONAL
LEARNING**

Recommendation 1

Improving foundational learning outcomes must become a primary focus of the FCDO's education programming, accountability, resource allocation and research.

Recommendation 2

The FCDO should fully integrate measurement of impact on foundational learning outcomes throughout bilateral education programme cycles including at the design, implementation and post-project evaluation stages.

Recommendation 3

The UK should increase its ODA investments in basic education in countries and contexts where literacy rates are lowest.

Recommendation 4

The UK should immediately reverse the cuts to education ODA, return UK spending on ODA to the legally-obliged level of 0.7% of GNI, increase the share of the ODA budget allocated to education to at least 15%, and increase investment in basic education, with a strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy.

2

**SUPPORT EFFECTIVE,
LOCALLY-DRIVEN
SYSTEMS OF
EDUCATION**

Recommendation 5

The UK should prioritise supporting teachers and education systems so they are equipped to effectively teach reading, writing and maths.

Recommendation 6

The FCDO should support partner governments to evaluate education policy for what is and is not working so that interventions can be improved and iterated based on insights from rigorous testing.

Recommendation 7

The UK should accelerate and actively support local involvement in and ownership of UK ODA-funded basic education programming.

Recommendation 8

To maximise the impact of UK's basic education work and support locally-led programming, the FCDO should immediately reverse its ban on the hiring of foreign nationals.

3

**ENGAGE
STRATEGICALLY WITH
BILATERAL AND
MULTILATERAL
PARTNERS TO DRIVE
FOCUS ON
FOUNDATIONAL
LEARNING**

Recommendation 9

The UK should use its influence at multilateral forums such as at the Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait, and the World Bank, to promote greater emphasis and collaboration on improving foundational learning, and increase monitoring and collective accountability on foundational learning targets (using commonly agreed metrics).

Recommendation 10

The UK should use opportunities such as the Transforming Education Summit to work with other donors to prioritise investment in foundational literacy and numeracy, and encourage them to join the UK in holding multilaterals to account on their investments in this area.

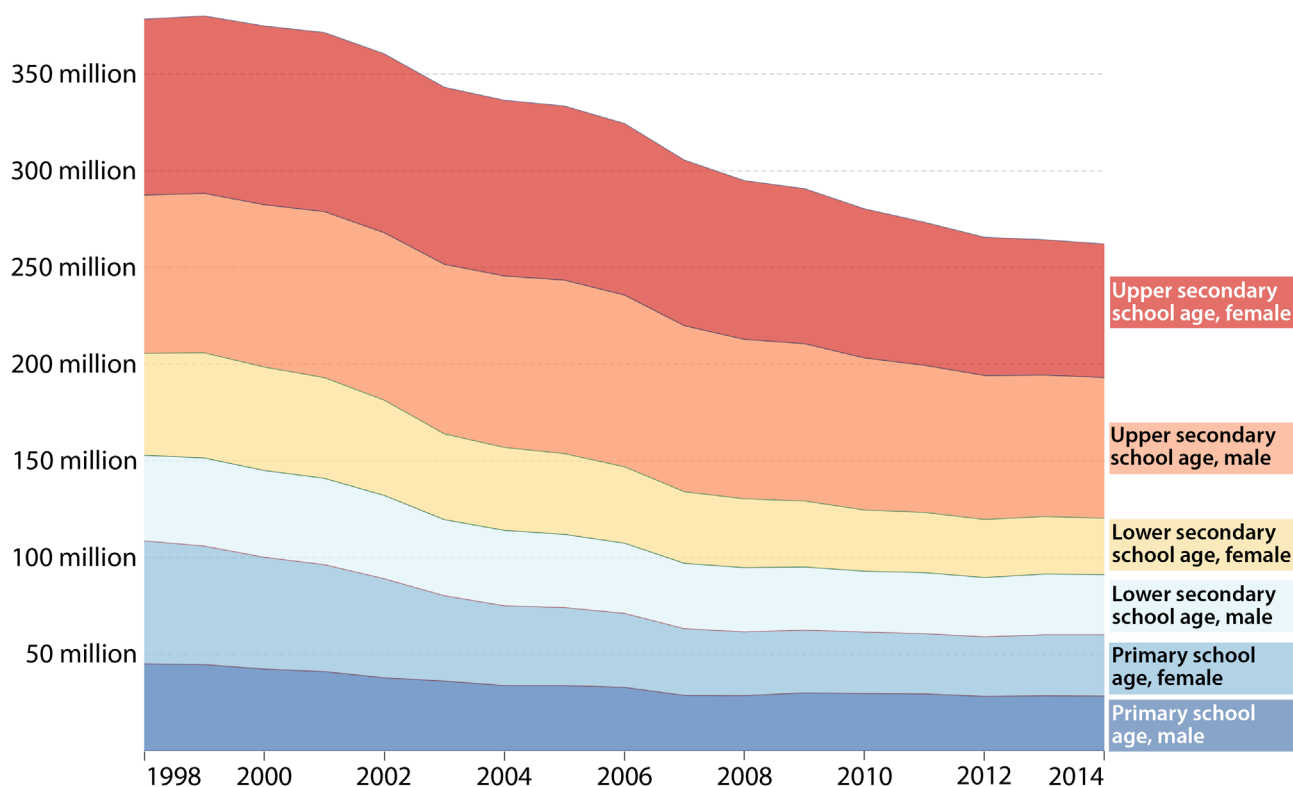
Recommendation 11

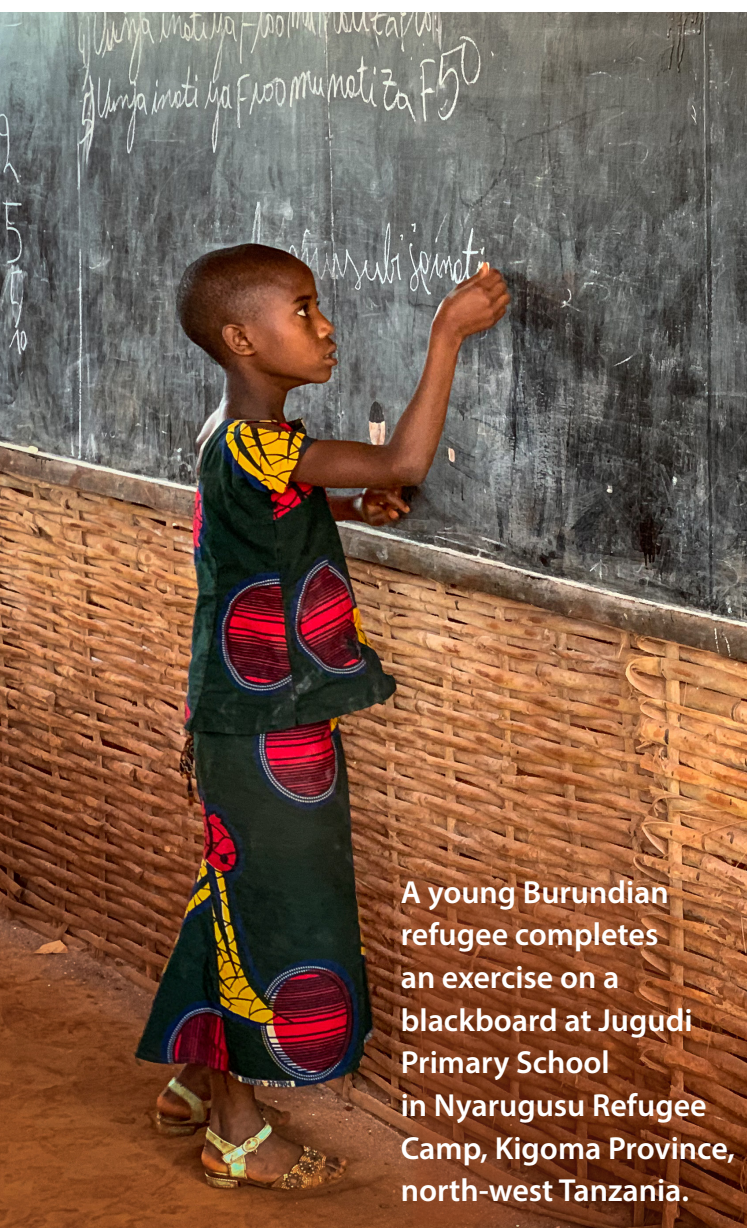
The UK should pledge ambitiously to Education Cannot Wait at its upcoming replenishment and utilise its diplomatic capacity to encourage other countries to do the same.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there have been a range of education initiatives, interventions and declarations aimed at achieving inclusive and equitable access to quality education for all children. Governments around the world have demonstrated an increased political ambition to address this challenge, both when implementing education systems domestically, and in the case of some governments as “donors” supporting and funding education systems. Notably, low- and middle-income countries have improved children’s access to schooling at a remarkable rate, particularly for marginalised children. 91% of the world’s children are now in school, more than at any other point in human history⁴. Since 1995, the number of girls in education globally has risen by 180 million, the percentage of countries with gender parity in primary education has risen from 56% to 65%⁵, and by 2008 the enrolment of students at the primary level in the average low-income country⁶ was almost on par with the average high-income country. The following chart further demonstrates the rate of progress, showing that the total number of out-of-school children dropped from 381 million children in 1998 to 263 million in 2014⁷.

Number of out-of-school children, World, 1998 to 2014





A young Burundian refugee completes an exercise on a blackboard at Jugudi Primary School in Nyarugusu Refugee Camp, Kigoma Province, north-west Tanzania.

Image © UNHCR/Farha Bhooyro

Substantial challenges remain if we are to achieve universal access to education - a pillar of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4)⁹ - not least because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 258 million children who remained out of school prior to its onset¹⁰. The high number of children who remain out-of-school and the growing challenges that climate change is presenting, means that the gains made cannot be taken for granted. Improving access to education should clearly still command global attention and effective action.

The strong overall progress that has been achieved on access to education in recent decades simply hasn't been mirrored by improved learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy. Even before the emergence of COVID-19, a staggering 90%¹¹ of children in low-income countries could not read and understand a simple text when they reached their 10th birthday, a benchmark which the World Bank uses to define "learning poverty"¹². Illustrating the scale of global inequality on literacy, the exact inverse of this statistic is true in high-income countries where 9 in 10 children can read with comprehension at the age of 10¹³.

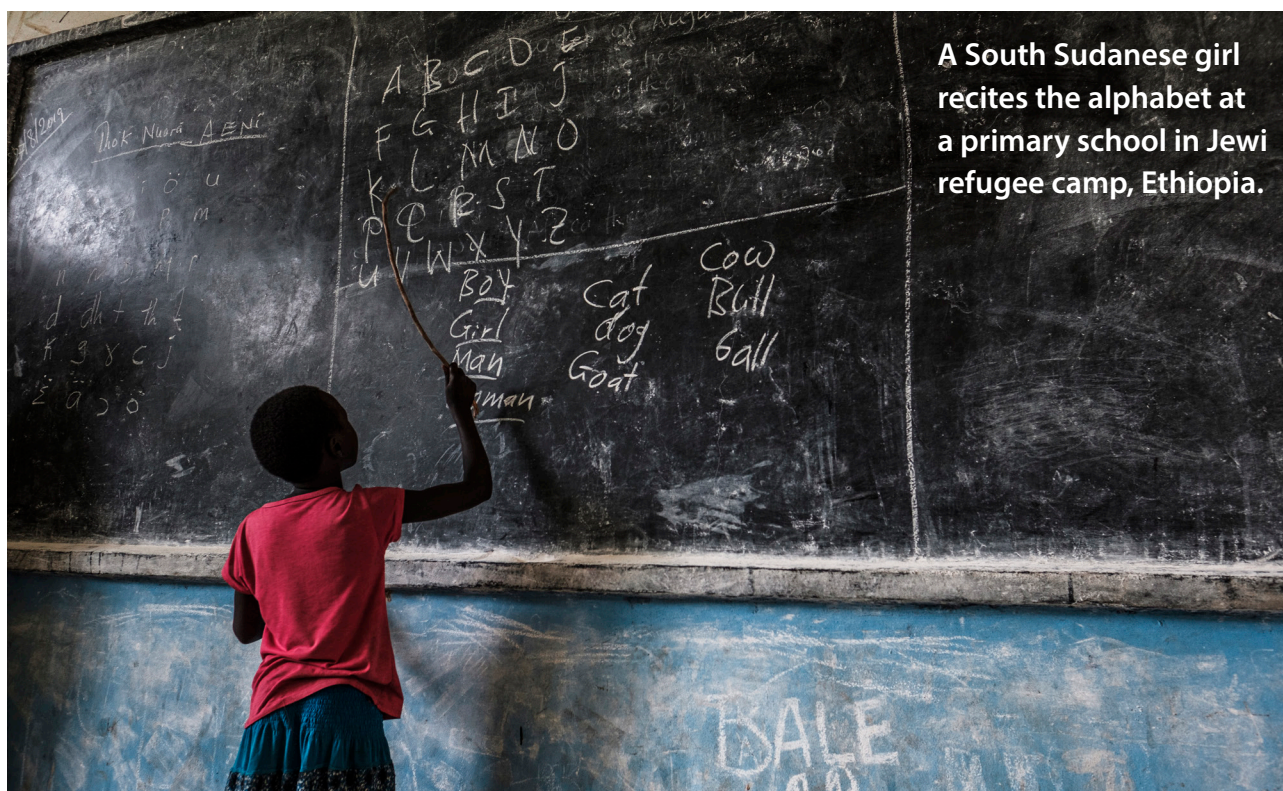
Focusing on access to schooling and quality of education should not be a binary choice, but

instead two sides of the same coin. For example, evidence shows that lack of learning progress is one of the primary causes of school drop-out rates for the most marginalised children¹⁴. Conversely, it has been found that achievement in mathematics at the age of 8 results in a 49% reduction in the risk of school drop outs for girls¹⁵. Though we must strive to reduce the gap in out-of-school numbers, many of the benefits of getting children into school are negated if they are not going to learn when there¹⁶.

Despite its transformative potential, progress on improving children's literacy rates has been far too slow. At current rates of progress, around 43% of all children will still be in learning poverty

by 2030¹⁷ and it will take at least 40 years¹⁸ to achieve the SDG 4 targets on learningⁱ. A recent study of 87 low- and middle-income countries found 'virtually no case worldwide of dramatic improvements in education quality over a fifty-year time horizon' with the vast majority of studied countries having either stagnated or declined during that time¹⁹. The study concludes that though literacy rates have risen substantially, 'virtually all progress has been due to the increase in access to school rather than any improvement [sic] school quality'²⁰. Though more and more children globally are in school, most are not receiving an education that improves their ability to read and write sufficiently. They are being let down by schooling which is not supporting them to learn to a level that allows them to reach their potential.

A similar story can be told with regard to numeracy. Globally, there are an estimated 387 million children of primary school age without minimum proficiency in maths²¹. This figure rises to 617 million children when including those who are secondary school aged and adolescents²². As with literacy, the problem is most acute in low resource settings. 60% of children of primary school age in low- and middle- income countries are not proficient in mathematics, with this rate jumping to 86% of children in Sub-Saharan Africa²³. Moreover, despite the expectation that children should achieve basic foundational numeracy skills by the end of grade 2, a recent UNICEF study of 32 low- and middle-income countries revealed just 18% of children had achieved that level by that age²⁴.



A South Sudanese girl recites the alphabet at a primary school in Jewi refugee camp, Ethiopia.

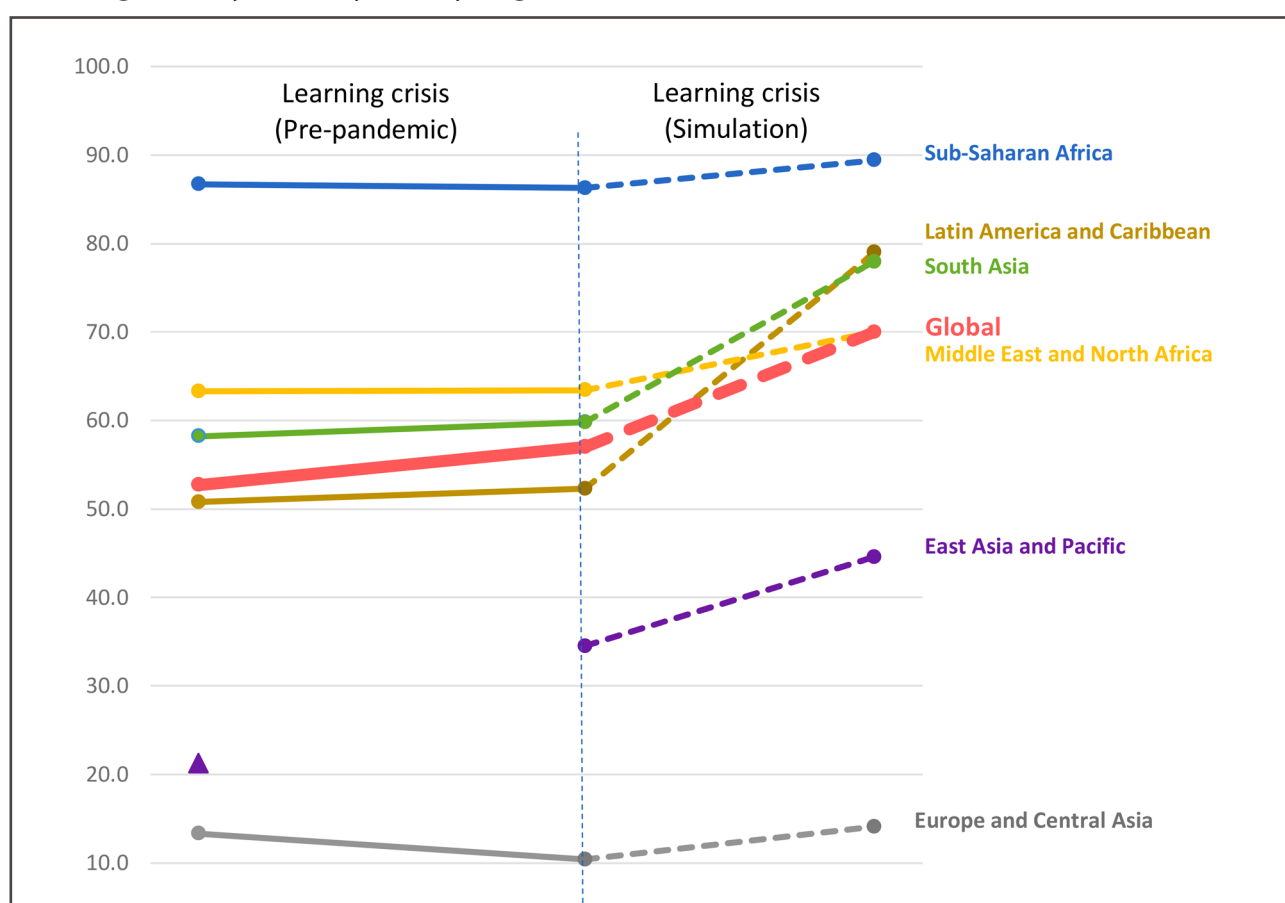
Image © UNHCR/Eduardo Soteras Jalil

ⁱ SDG 4.1 states: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes

COVID-19 IMPACT

This 'learning crisis'²⁵ in literacy and numeracy in middle- and low- income countries existed prior to the pandemic but unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 required school closures and prolonged educational disruption have served to exacerbate it. Prior to the pandemic, 53% of children in all low- and middle-income countries were experiencing learning poverty; research from the World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF²⁶ suggests that this figure has now risen to 70%. In what is determined to be emblematic of a wider global trend, the same research has measured significant learning losses in reading and maths in the study's focus-countries of South Africa, Mexico, Brazil and rural India; with younger learners, girls and those from low-income backgrounds disproportionately affected²⁷. Though we await further data on the impact of the pandemic on learning, research has indicated that without remediation (effective action to support children to catch-up)²⁸, just a three month period of school closure can result in up to a year's worth of lost learning. The simulated data below is further illustrative of how the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the learning crisis.

Learning Poverty Globally and by Region: 2015 and 2019, with 2022 Simulation Estimates



Source: World Bank, UNICEF, FCDO, USAID, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and UNESCO²⁹

Even before the pandemic's onset it was clear that a step-change in approach was required in order to reverse the stagnation in global learning levels in reading, writing and maths. Pandemic-enforced school closures and disruption to the learning of 1.6 billion learners across 190 countries has only underlined this imperative further³⁰. The current stagnation and decline in literacy and numeracy levels is simply unacceptable because the status quo means that millions of children are leaving school every year unable to read, write or do basic maths. As this policy brief argues, radical change is required if the international community is to avoid failing another generation of young people and those who follow them. Before considering the UK's role specifically, it is important to first consider the question of "why foundational literacy and numeracy?".

WHY FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY AND NUMERACY?

The Incheon Declaration, which provides the framework for the achievement of SDG 4, has been adopted by 184 countries and enshrines the right of all children to be literate and numerate³¹. The declaration stresses the importance of achieving both as the basis for any child's future learning. It is for this reason that we term being able to read and write, and complete basic maths as "foundational". The foundational years are when children absorb how to learn. They develop the basic reasoning and socio-emotional skills that enable them to navigate and benefit from the learning process. These foundational years of a child's education are so crucial because if they reach grade 6 without necessary skills in numeracy and literacy, their chances of improving post-primary school drop substantially³². Moreover, mastery of both skills can provide a young person the springboard for the achievement of their potential and future aspirations. Failing to do so holds back a child's development and prevents them from engaging with curricula as they vary and become more advanced³³. In other words, foundational literacy and numeracy is a 'gateway skill'³⁴. It is by no means the only important element of a child's education, but it is fundamental to maximising their engagement with most of those other aspects.

Achieving high levels of literacy and numeracy can have a transformative impact on countries' and communities' development. If all people in low-income countries left school being able to read it is estimated that 170 million people would be lifted out of poverty, which would equate to a 12% reduction in global levels³⁵. Yet the learning crisis is currently costing governments \$129 billion per year³⁶ and is now projected to result in lost earnings of \$17 trillion for the current generation of students, equivalent to roughly 14% of global GDP today³⁷. Conversely, research considering data from 32 OECD countries, has found that each standard deviation increase in

numeracy skills results in higher earnings of 20%³⁸. Put simply, the learning crisis whereby millions of children in low- and middle-income countries are being denied these skills, is 'a massive waste of talent and human potential'³⁹.

In addition to the obvious economic benefits of investing in children's foundational learning, doing so also helps build more resilient, healthy and equal societies, as well as more prosperous ones. Foundational learning is key to building climate resilience with a literate population often better equipped to respond and adapt to extreme weather events⁴⁰. Equally, being able to read and write is key to building community-level health literacy⁴¹ and higher literacy levels correlate with improved child and family health and nutrition⁴². With close to two thirds of the world's illiterate people being women, illiteracy is also a highly gendered issue⁴³. Supporting women and girls to become literate delays marriage, correlates with lower risk of early pregnancy and opens up opportunities for women's participation in labour markets. As Action Track 1 of this paper suggests, if the UK is to achieve its ambitions on girls' education, foundational learning must become a central priority of the country's ODA portfolio.



South Sudanese children write in notebooks at a primary school in Jewi refugee camp, Ethiopia.

Foundational learning is not a panacea, it will not solve all of the challenges faced by the world today. Yet, there is a weight of evidence to show how transformative it can be when countries are equipped with high levels of literacy and proficiency in maths. It underpins virtually every SDG 4 goal⁴⁴ and is crucial to the achievement of several other SDGs such as SDG 1, SDG 3 and SDG 8⁴⁵. Investing in education and achieving results in foundational literacy and numeracy can take time and requires sustained commitment from political leaders. For “donor” governments, this has often been a challenge to achieve when the delivery results of other forms of ODA can be more immediately tangible. However, the severity of the learning crisis means that we simply cannot allow the current trajectory to continue. Despite the scale of the challenge that the learning crisis presents and the regression caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the positive news is that it is possible to improve learning quickly and that great improvements can be made even where resources are stretched. First and foremost, foundational learning must become an urgent priority of the international community, and specifically for the UK Government, which the following sections of this paper will now focus on.

ACTION TRACK 1

FOCUS BILATERAL EDUCATION ODA ON FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING

Foundational learning is a feature of the UK Government's global education policy and strategy. Both the Department for International Development's (DFID) 2018 Education Policy⁴⁶ and the FCDO's 2021-26 Girls' Education Action⁴⁷ Plan make several explicit references and commitments to supporting improved foundational learning outcomes, whilst foundational skills are also mentioned in the UK Government's recently released International Development Strategy⁴⁸. At the civil-servant level there is a strong level of understanding of the learning crisis and commitment to the UK's role in addressing it. The FCDO has also shown strong intent when it comes to research for foundational learning through its funding of the RISE Programme⁴⁹ and its new research initiative, the What Works Hubⁱⁱ. Altogether, these factors show a level of recognition and attention to foundational learning which cannot be said of many other ODA-granting governments. This should undoubtedly be commended.

Despite this, it is clear that work remains to be done in order to ensure focused prioritisation of foundational literacy and numeracy at the political level, in order to maximise the impact of UK ODA on improving learning outcomes. At times, there is a tendency for foundational learning to become lost in a sea of UK global education priorities. This dynamic is reflected in the conclusions of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI's) recent report, *Assessing UK aid's results in education*⁵⁰, which is a comprehensive external review of UK education ODA over the last 7 years. The report explicitly calls for the UK Government to greater 'focus on achieving better quality learning in future to better tackle the global learning crisis' and that, 'the UK must focus more on ensuring future work improves children's learning'⁵¹.

Focused prioritisation of foundational learning is one of the most important factors in transforming the educational prospects of children in low- and middle-income countries. Research shows that when countries, including ODA-granting governments like the UK, demonstrate sustained political will to improve foundational learning outcomes, impressive results can be achieved. A fine example of the impact that an ODA-granting government can achieve when it truly commits to specific focus on literacy and numeracy is the record of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Though not perfect, recent research⁵² has shown the agency dominates the field when it comes to "donor" governments delivering programmes which improve foundational learning outcomes at scale. The UK Government has signalled its ambition to impact foundational learning outcomes in a similar way, but in order to do so, a more focused approach is required. As a global community we must act fast to put learning first if we are to end the learning crisis and achieve SDG 4.

ii The What Works Hub is a £55 million, five-year UK-funded research initiative aimed at providing global education evidence and advice for FCDO partner governments.

Aside from its programmes, research plays a crucial role in driving progress on foundational learning globally by helping to provide the evidence-base for what works. It is important that the UK ensures that improving learning outcomes remains at the core of the research initiatives it funds. As the What Works Hub remains in development, the UK Government should ensure its focus on foundational learning is not diverted or diluted. This is especially true as the RISE Programme, which has been at the forefront of research into addressing the learning crisis in low- and middle-income countries, draws to a close.

1

**RECOMMENDATION 1**

Improving foundational learning outcomes must become a primary focus of the FCDO's education programming, accountability, resource allocation and research.

MEASUREMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

Between 2015 and 2021 there were 117 UK-funded bilateral basic education programmes that each spent over £1 million⁵³. However, the majority of UK ODA bilateral investments in education are achieving little or no tangible impact on improving literacy and numeracy learning levels at any significant scale. For example, an extensive study from RTI International and the Centre for Global Development⁵⁴ could identify just one UK bilateral education programme (EQUIP-T⁵⁵) which improved learning outcomes at scale. Though the study noted that many other ODA-granting countries did not register a single programme with clear positive impact, the research suggests that a change in track is still required for the majority of UK bilateral basic education programming. The paucity of examples of successful impact is further underlined by the findings of the ICAI review which found that only 11 UK-funded bilateral education programmes were collecting sufficient data for judging impact on learning, and of those only six had achieved their targets for improving children's learning⁵⁶.

Measurement and tracking of impact on foundational learning outcomes, and subsequent programme adaptation, are some of the most important elements of any successful education programme delivery. Yet currently for the FCDO, data limitations mean it is not able to judge impact on learning for many of its programmes⁵⁷. Despite a clear commitment to improvement in this area in DFID's 2018 Education Policy through the adoption of a cross-programme headline indicator to assess whether children reached are learning, the FCDO is yet to make this a reality⁵⁸.

During the 2015-2021 period DFID/FCDO reported that gaps in data collection have often been due to weak local learning assessments and a lack of common metrics for measurement of progress in reading and maths⁵⁹. Despite this and ICAI stating that the FCDO's current results methodology does not sufficiently track impact on learning achievements being supported by the UK, the government has claimed that 'UK support had helped children to gain a better education than they otherwise would have done without UK assistance'⁶⁰. This "better than nothing" approach with such clear shortcomings with regard to data collection is holding back the UK's impact on the learning crisis and is undermining value for money of every pound spent in doing so.

As ICAI⁶¹ have identified, better measurement and tracking of aggregate results of UK bilateral education programmes would provide the UK Government with a far more accurate and reliable measure of the number of children the UK is supporting to gain a 'decent education'⁶² than current models provide. Moreover, by better measuring impact on learning at regular intervals throughout programme design and implementation cycles through standardised methods such as rigorous testing, the FCDO will be able to better monitor the long-term impact of its education investments. At the same time, it will also be able to track progress and challenges on live programmes to inform adaptation rather than solely informing future ones.



A Burundian schoolchild solves a maths problem on the board in a class taught outside under the trees by refugee teacher Dusabumukama Melance at Jugudi Primary School in Nyarugusu Refugee Camp, Kigoma Province, western Tanzania

Though limited, there are some UK-supported programmes which there is evidence to show are succeeding, and others which may be but for which there is data lacking. Better integrating cross-programme learning is another key part of adopting a more rigorous and standardised approach to measurement of impact on learning outcomes. The UK Government has stressed a commitment to focusing on “what works”⁶³, and doing so by identifying successful elements of more successful programmes like EQUIP-T for wider adoption will be crucial if impact on foundational learning is to be expanded.

In conclusion, it is clear that the FCDO needs to strengthen both its focus on, and tracking of, the impact of its education programmes on children’s foundational learning⁶⁴. This is especially important given that the International Development Strategy has indicated the government’s desire to increase funding for bilateral ODA. Adopting more rigorous measurement of learning outcomes would allow the UK Government to measure just how much its stated focus on education quality⁶⁵ is being put into practice. It would allow the FCDO to proactively consider the impact of all its bilateral education programmes on improving literacy and numeracy outcomes. Failing to do so risks a continuation of the status quo where very few UK investments in education are producing a discernible improvement in literacy and numeracy levels for children impacted by them.

2**RECOMMENDATION 2**

The FCDO should fully integrate measurement of impact on foundational learning outcomes throughout bilateral education programme cycles including at the design, implementation and post-project evaluation stages.

COUNTRY TARGETING OF UK EDUCATION ODA FOR FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING

The UK Government has reported that it currently funds basic education programmes in around 20 countries⁶⁶. However, as the table below shows, the majority of the FCDO's ODA for basic education is not being spent in the countries with the lowest youth literacy rates.

The 17 countries (with available recent data) with the world's lowest youth literacy rates are listed in Table A below:

Table A

Country	Youth Literacy Rate (Ages 15-24)	Adult Literacy Rate (Ages 15 and Above)	UK Basic Education Programme ?
Chad	31%	22%	NO
Central African Republic	38%	37%	NO
Niger	43%	35%	NO
Mali	46%	31%	NO
Afghanistan	47%	31%	YES
South Sudan	48%	35%	YES
Guinea	54%	40%	NO
Liberia	55%	48%	NO
Burkina Faso	59%	39%	NO
Guinea-Bissau	60%	46%	NO
Benin	61%	43%	NO
Mauritania	64%	53%	NO
The Gambia	67%	51%	NO
Sierra Leone	67%	43%	YES
Papua New Guinea	68%	62%	NO
Senegal	69%	52%	NO
Mozambique	71%	61%	NO

Source: World Bank⁶⁷; World Bank⁶⁸; UK Government Response to Parliamentary Written Question No. 127355⁶⁹

Of the 17 countries listed in the table above, in 2020, which is the most recent reporting year, the UK only supported a basic education programme in three of these countries (Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and South Sudan). According to the UK Government, the top-five recipients of UK ODA for basic education in 2020 were Pakistan, Lebanon, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Bangladesh⁷⁰. According to World Bank data, Pakistan has a youth literacy rate of 73%, Lebanon's is 100%, Tanzania's is 86%, Rwanda's is 86% and Bangladesh's is 94%⁷¹, all with notably higher rates than the countries listed in Table A. As Table B shows, when considering the top six recipients of UK ODA for education over a longer period of time (2015-21) a similar trend is observed:

Table B

Country	Youth Literacy Rate (Ages 15-24)	Adult Literacy Rate (Ages 15 and Above)	Top Five Recipient 2020?	Top Six Recipient 2015-21?
Pakistan	73%	58%	YES	YES
Tanzania	86%	78%	YES	YES
Bangladesh	94%	75%	YES	YES
Rwanda	86%	73%	YES	NO
Lebanon	100%	95%	YES	NO
Nigeria	75%	62%	NO	YES
Ethiopia	73%	52%	NO	YES
Syria	92%	81%	NO	YES

Source: World Bank⁷²; World Bank⁷³; UK Government Response to Parliamentary Written Question No. 127355⁷⁴; ICAI⁷⁵

The remaining 15 country recipients of UK ODA for basic education in 2020 are listed below with accompanying youth literacy rate⁷⁶ in brackets:

Nigeria (75%), Ghana (92%), Malawi (73%), Zimbabwe (90%), Ethiopia (73%), South Sudan (48%), Uganda (89%), DRC (85%), Myanmar (89%), Jordan (99%), Syria (92%), Sierra Leone (67%), Zambia (92%), Kenya (88%) and Afghanistan (47%).

The average youth literacy rate in the 20 countries receiving UK funding for basic education is 81.9% compared to an average of just 55.8% amongst the 17 countries with the lowest rates of youth literacy.

Overall, this data, along with Tables A and B, show that the UK is directing its basic education ODA to a selection of countries, whilst others, often where the learning crisis is most severe, are not receiving any UK assistance for basic education. This dynamic is particularly acute in the Sahel region, where Niger, Chad, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso all receive no UK assistance for basic education, despite 88% of children in this region experiencing learning poverty⁷⁷. In Niger, a staggering 99% of children cannot read at the age of 10, with this figure only marginally better in Chad where 98% cannot do so⁷⁸.

Without seeking to minimise the scale of the challenges in some of the countries the UK is directing its funding to, it is curious that they have been selected to receive basic education ODA funding ahead of other countries with more obvious need. There could be a variety of reasons to explain this, some of which there is a rationale for. For example, it is undeniable that many of the countries which are receiving UK bilateral support for basic education still have unacceptably low rates of literacy and numeracy where significant improvement is required. Equally, it should be noted that UK support in Lebanon has been largely focused on emergency education for Syrian refugees, so its national youth literacy rate of 100% is less applicable here. There are also operational, linguistic and political considerations that make working in English-speaking countries, those with more developed infrastructure or those with strong political leadership on education, more conducive environments for the FCDO to operate in. Granted, some of the countries with the lowest rates of youth literacy are conflict-affected with large numbers of displaced people which present a series of operational challenges for the FCDO. Yet, as demonstrated by the list of countries that the UK is already supporting, DFID and the FCDO have demonstrated their ability to successfully adapt to challenging contexts, similar conflict-affected environments, or countries that host large refugee populations where continued emergency education is so important.

There are also some more questionable aspects of the way that the UK has allocated its ODA. Rather than being driven by motivations for poverty alleviation alone, the UK has a historical record of weighting its ODA allocation to former colonies or those who are Commonwealth members⁷⁹. It is also worth considering that several of the 20 countries which receive UK ODA for basic education also have burgeoning middle-classes and have achieved many years of strong economic growth. Given the UK Government's clear desire for closer alignment of the UK's ODA with its strategic and economic interests as seen in the Integrated Review⁸⁰ and International Development Strategy⁸¹, it is fair to question whether the UK is skewing its education ODA towards countries with whom it seeks to develop strong economic ties in the longer-term.

Overall, these motivations do not justify such a seemingly stark neglect of children in countries with less favourable environments or those from countries which present the UK with less of an opportunity to pursue self-interest. These ignored, less "attractive" or operationally-conducive countries are those facing some of the most severe challenges with regards to the learning

crisis. Perhaps some of them may not offer the most obvious opportunities to impact learning in the shorter term, and some of the contexts may be operationally impossible. Yet there are a number of countries where opportunities exist to rapidly improve their staggering low literacy levels but seem to be routinely ignored by a number of major “donor” countries like the UK. On the other hand, USAID, the development agency of another English-speaking country, managed to support basic education programmes in 13 of the 17 lowest countries by youth literacy rate between 2018 to 2021⁸², compared to the UK’s three.

The UK Government can and must do more to address the scale of the challenges in these contexts. RESULTS UK is not calling for the UK to rob Peter to pay Paul by de-prioritising certain countries simply because their learning levels are marginally better. That would be detrimental to the progress which is already being achieved in these contexts. What we are calling for is for the UK Government to be more ambitious and open to moving beyond supporting the countries the UK has had a historically strong partnership with on education. This means increasing support to those countries where both the learning crisis is most severe and where windows of opportunity exist but are yet to be harnessed.

3



RECOMMENDATION 3

The UK should increase its ODA investments in basic education in countries and contexts where literacy rates are lowest.

FINANCING FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING

One of the obvious factors which underpins most efforts to scale-up and increase the UK’s impact on the learning crisis is financing. Put simply, the UK is not currently allocating sufficient funding to global education and has not done so for a number of years. Education’s share of total UK ODA is in fact declining. Compared with an average of 9.1% allocated for education between 2011 and 2015⁸³, it currently sits at just 4.5% at the time of writing⁸⁴, down from 5.6% in 2020ⁱⁱⁱ and 7% in 2019⁸⁵; all well below the international benchmark of allocating at least 15% of ODA spending to education⁸⁶. The UK Government’s decision to renege on its manifesto and legally-enshrined commitment to spend 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) on ODA has had a severe impact on the UK’s education ODA budget. Estimates suggest that for the financial year 2021/22

iii This statistic is based on the last figure we found listed on the FCDO’s Development Tracker for 2020. Unfortunately, on that website they do not list UK ODA by sector year on year, so once it was 2021, the previous year’s figures were no longer available.

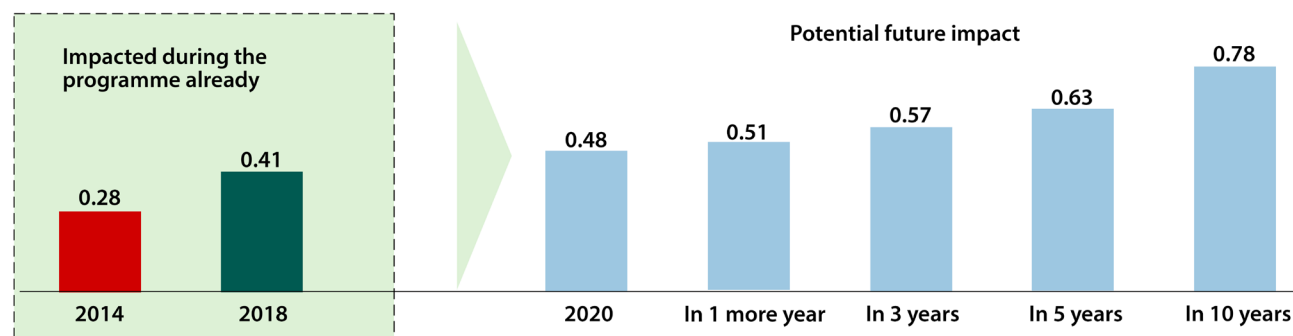
education ODA was cut by at least 25%, with many programmes being wound down or significantly scaled back. Bilateral education ODA in particular was cut from £789 million in 2019 to £545 million in 2020, which represents a 31% reduction⁸⁷. This is set to be further reduced with current FCDO forecasts suggesting that the bilateral education budget will be around £421 million⁸⁸.

In addition to such significant cuts to UK education ODA, the cutting process has been accompanied by a general lack of clarity and transparency from the FCDO which has prevented external observers such as ICAI⁸⁹ and civil society organisations from understanding exactly where and how they were made. The cuts have also significantly undermined partner trust in UK assistance for education⁹⁰ and can only have held back the UK's impact on improving learning outcomes for children affected by programmes impacted by cuts.

If improvements to the UK's basic education programming are made so that greater impact on learning outcomes on a significant scale can be achieved, sustainability of UK assistance will be crucial for yielding programme results in the longer-term. Yet the opposite has happened over the last two years with many programmes having lost funding mid-cycle. For example, the UK has entirely cut support to programmes such as Marginalised No More in Nepal⁹¹, which is aimed at supporting 7000 highly marginalised girls to learn basic literacy and numeracy through an accelerated learning programme. Loss of funding mid-cycle not only stymies future progress, but it also erodes progress that has already been made and undermines return on investment. Save the Children have estimated that UK cuts to education ODA means that an estimated 700,000 fewer girls will be in education as a direct result⁹², whilst broader cuts to the FCDO's women and girls budget have stymied programmes such as those aimed at maternal health and teenage pregnancy both of which affect girls' school attendance.

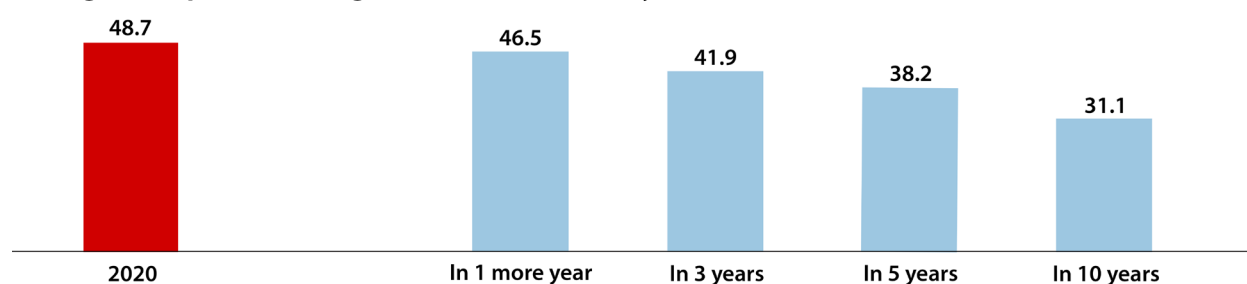
Thankfully, the UK's regressive approach to education financing has not been matched by some notable lower-income countries. One of the successes of the Global Education Summit which the UK co-hosted with Kenya in 2021, was the Kenyatta Declaration, signed by 19 low- and middle-income country heads of state which committed them to increase spending on education to at least 20% of their national budgets⁹³. The UK Government should follow their lead and match their laudable ambition by significantly increasing UK education ODA, particularly on initiatives specifically focused on improving foundational learning. According to latest available FCDO data, the UK currently allocates just 27% of education ODA specifically to early childhood and primary education⁹⁴ when these are the most important stages of any child's education and are the crucial platforms for future learning. Yet as demonstrated by the FCDO's most recent successful basic education programme, EQUIP-T in Tanzania, when spent effectively ODA for foundational literacy and numeracy offers strong return on investment:

No. of children with minimum literacy skills in millions



Source: OPM Final Report, April 2020⁹⁶; Acasus⁹⁷

Average cost per child to gain minimum literacy skills, over time in GBP (EQUIP-T)



Source: OPM Final Report, April 2020⁹⁸; OPM EQUIP-T Cost Study, 2020⁹⁹; Acasus¹⁰⁰

Assuming a similar trajectory of improvement would be achieved, had the EQUIP-T programme continued, the positive effect on literacy skills would have continued to rise over the next ten years, yet the average cost per child would have actually decreased significantly. Though this is just one example, it is illustrative of the value-for-money offered by sustained investment in foundational literacy and numeracy programmes that actually work. Further underlining the cost-benefit potential of investing in foundational learning is the USAID-funded Tusome reading programme in Kenya, which supported 3 million children to read with fluency and was able to do so for just \$27 per child⁹⁵.

4



RECOMMENDATION 4

The UK should immediately reverse the cuts to education ODA, return UK spending on ODA to the legally-obliged level of 0.7% of GNI, increase the share of the ODA budget allocated to education to at least 15%, and increase investment in basic education, with a strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy.

ACTION TRACK 2

SUPPORT EFFECTIVE, LOCALLY-DRIVEN, SYSTEMS OF EDUCATION

TEACHERS AND TEACHING

Insufficient support for and training of teachers, and under-utilisation of the most effective teaching methods, are some of the persistent barriers to getting children learning literacy and numeracy in low-and middle-income countries. The UK should prioritise supporting teachers and education systems so they are equipped to teach reading, writing and maths. Effective teaching practices are directly connected to improved learning outcomes, and ongoing support for teachers is essential to sustain improvements in learning. It is important to note here, that as a member of the Send My Friend to School Coalition, RESULTS UK fully endorses the recommendations of its latest report, *All My Friends Need Teachers*¹⁰¹ which provides a detailed blueprint for improving FCDO teacher policy.

Without seeking to be overly prescriptive, there are several important elements of effective teaching of reading, writing and maths which all have a wealth of supporting evidence to back up their efficacy. These include practices such as structured pedagogy, teaching at the right level and teaching in a child's mother tongue. Structured pedagogy can be broadly defined as a set of



Teacher Zahida, 50, teaches a class at the Izzdin al Qassan Primary School in East Mosul, Iraq. Zahida has taught at the school for 19 years.

evidence-based measures that combine to produce effective classroom teaching¹⁰². UNICEF has recently developed a framework of structured pedagogy to address the learning crisis based around four key pillars, which form the basis for successful teaching of literacy and numeracy: 1) teacher professional development; 2) teaching and learning materials; 3) formative assessment; 4) primary caregiver engagement. Structured teaching models with emphasis on these areas have shown strong results when it comes to improving foundational learning¹⁰³. For example, a review of over 248 studies of education programmes in low- and middle-income countries found that structured pedagogical approaches achieve the largest and most consistent positive effect on learning outcomes¹⁰⁴. Elements of structured pedagogy such as teaching at the right level (TaRL), where instruction is aligned with a child's current level, and language of instruction being in a child's mother tongue¹⁰⁵, have both been shown to significantly improve foundational learning outcomes for children in low-income country contexts¹⁰⁶.

Another important focus to consider is the utilisation of remedial and accelerated learning programming in countries with large populations of children who are behind-track on literacy and numeracy. These programmes are targeted and when done effectively with sufficient instructional time dedicated to them - as the case study at the end of this section demonstrates - they can help support children to rapidly catch-up with required learning levels. Overall, the elements highlighted here are by no means exhaustive - the UK should consider all approaches which put learning first and have a weight of evidence behind them - though these examples do represent some of the most evidence-based measures which the UK should prioritise if it hopes to support teachers and education systems to combat learning poverty.

5**RECOMMENDATION 5**

The UK should prioritise supporting teachers and education systems so they are equipped to effectively teach reading, writing and maths.

SUPPORTING LEARNING SYSTEMS

It is important to stress that equipping teachers to effectively teach literacy and numeracy should not only be integrated into UK ODA programmes but also embedded into UK support for partner government country governments and the education systems they are responsible for.

This is imperative given that the majority of funding for education in low- and middle- income countries is domestically rather than “donor”-sourced¹⁰⁷ and teacher policy is the sole primacy of national governments. Supporting these partners with mainstream integration of these measures in the long term offers far more transformative potential than stand-alone UK education programmes.

The UK can significantly increase its impact by actively supporting local leadership in the development of national education systems and policy in countries where foundational learning levels are lowest. This means working with partner country governments to foster education systems which are also “learning systems”. In this sense, partnering governments to up-scale and replicate the previously recommended principles of rigorous measurement of learning outcomes, accountability and action for improving them, is key. This can help foster partner government ownership of education systems which are equipped to test what is and is not working, learn from this evidence, adapt and iterate approaches accordingly. The UK can support this in a variety of ways such as through direct funding support to increase monitoring capacity, supporting pilot programmes partnered with host governments, through sharing of expertise and by ensuring the research initiatives it is funding, such as the What Works Hub, have a strong focus on supporting the growth of “learning systems” in low-resource settings.

6**RECOMMENDATION 6**

The FCDO should support partner governments to evaluate education policy for what is and is not working so that interventions can be improved and iterated based on insights from rigorous testing.

LOCALISATION

As a matter of both principle and best-practice across the board, the UK should be striving to amplify the voices of those in the countries and contexts affected by UK ODA, and maximise their influence over how it is spent. If the UK is to be an effective and reliable partner to low- and middle-income partner governments in building effective foundational learning systems, it must adopt a genuine and substantive locally-led approach. The “localisation” agenda in international development has a growing body of evidence and support yet it is often spoken about without specificity or substance¹⁰⁸. This section seeks to avoid that by offering some tangible and practical steps.

Firstly, the UK Government’s support for improving foundational learning outcomes in low- and middle-income countries should not be a top-down approach. Such approaches, which have typified “donor” engagement with partner countries in the past, are desirable neither practically nor ethically. In practice, this means the UK should seek to engage with local stakeholders on their terms and adapt its assistance to meet their needs. These stakeholders, such as civil society, local and national governments, teachers, parents, and other community members in partner countries are often best placed to build capacity to improve foundational learning outcomes in the longer-term. As part of this, the UK should fund more country-based delivery partners, welcome local stakeholders’ agency to influence FCDO decision-making processes, and actively support their leadership.

As the previous sections highlight, there is a strong evidence-base of what has worked when it comes to improving learning outcomes in low- and middle-income countries, but it is also critical to ensure that this knowledge is tailored to, and rooted in, local contextual knowledge and relationships. The value of these influences for children’s learning cannot be understated. Not only do they offer sustainable and constant support - in contrast to “donors” who can come and go at the whim of their government - but they will speak children’s mother tongues, offer informal community support, and have a stronger understanding of local educational challenges.

The case study of an Effective Intervention project in Gambia at the end of this section illustrates the potential of quality integration of non-formal and community-based approaches. Alongside formal teaching, the project engaged “para-teachers” who were driven and committed local community members without teaching experience but who were supported so they were equipped to play a crucial role in delivering extra-curricular remedial assistance with the children’s reading and maths, with impressive gains achieved as a result. Ultimately, the involvement of parents, volunteers and local communities are strong influences on children’s foundational education and their engagement is critical to sustaining progress in the longer term.

As part of becoming more locally-grounded the FCDO should prioritise funding and collaborating with more local organisations as partners for its programmes aimed at driving school system improvements and learning. These organisations are rooted in their communities and offer an array of expertise and opportunities for impact, yet they are routinely underfunded by OECD “donor” governments who prefer to allocate the lion’s share to Northern-based international NGOs¹⁰⁹. Further, local experts should be centred in UK-funded research initiatives for learning such as the What Works Hub. These researchers should be senior as well as more junior and be engaged on equal terms to Northern-based researchers. Combining local expertise with international researchers can help yield strong results. For example the USAID-funded Tusome programme which impacted over 3 million children, achieved a doubling of children’s reading fluency levels in just a few years, identified the role of senior local researchers as being critical to the success of the programme¹¹⁰. Equally, local researchers have also been highlighted as pivotal to the UK’s most successful basic education programme, EQUIP-T in Tanzania, which positively impacted the foundational learning of 750,000 children.

Finally, at programme level, ICAI’s review of UK education ODA identified that working with ‘locally linked delivery partners’ and ‘employing staff with strong contextual knowledge’ as being key to reaching the most marginalised children¹¹¹. Yet this approach has been completely undermined by the merger of DFID into the FCO, which has resulted in the new department, the FCDO, adopting a ban on the hiring of foreign nationals¹¹². This is detrimental to the impact and success of UK global education programming, particularly when linguistic, cultural and local political expertise can be so important to successful delivery of any education programme. This move is already resulting in a significant loss of local expertise where the FCDO is operating and will continue to hold back the potential impact of UK education ODA until it is remedied. The UK should immediately reverse this ban on hiring foreign nationals, and instead adopt a more progressive and inclusive approach which would allow foreign nationals to work for the UK Government in delivering education programmes just as they did for decades in DFID. Doing so would expand the FCDO’s ability to reach communities with basic education assistance where it is currently lacking local language and contextual expertise. In this sense, reversing the ban would also complement Recommendation 3 of this report, which calls for the FCDO to expand its reach in countries with high levels of learning poverty where it has not been active.

7**RECOMMENDATION 7**

The UK should accelerate and actively support local involvement in and ownership of UK ODA-funded basic education programming.

8

**RECOMMENDATION 8**

To maximise the impact of UK's basic education work and support locally-led programming, the FCDO should immediately reverse its ban on the hiring of foreign nationals.



Image: UN Photo/Marco Dormino

EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION'S SCORE TRIAL PROJECT, GAMBIA

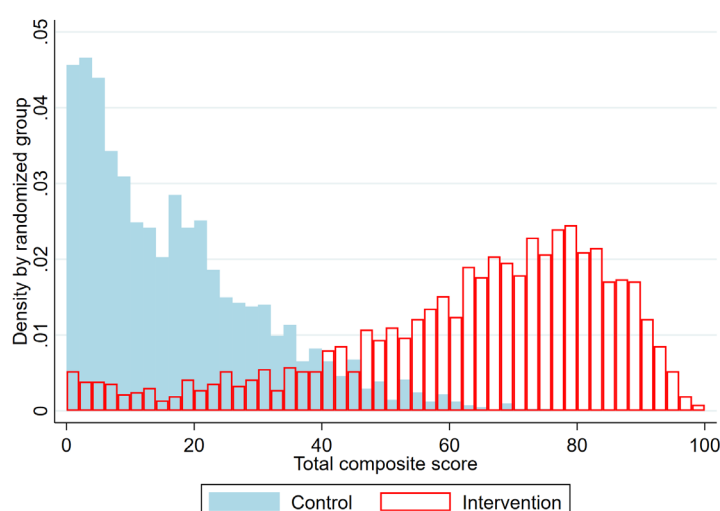
CASE STUDY

PROJECT SUMMARY

Despite growing global wealth and technological progress, there are many countries around the world where large portions of the population are living in extreme poverty and most children grow up in these environments to be illiterate and innumerate. As societies develop and their economies increasingly rely on digital technology, people without these skills will be unable to fully participate in many jobs and spheres in society, and as a result will be among the least fortunate in the world in terms of global distributions of education, health, and economic outcomes.

A significant global challenge is supporting people in these areas to gain these skills. Effective Intervention's Score Trial project aimed to address this in Gambia. Much of the prior research suggested that best outcomes we could hope for from educational interventions in low-income countries with the most extreme rates of learning poverty would be small to medium learning gains, leaving most people far from literacy or numeracy.

However, this study demonstrated that with the right inputs, much larger learning gains can be achieved in these contexts than previously thought possible. The study analysed the impact of a highly resourced, multi-pronged teacher-focused intervention. The project impacted 2458 children across 82 villages in rural Gambia and ran for three years. At its end, children were tested using rigorous literacy and numeracy tests.



THE RESULTS

The project achieved tremendous gains in learning, larger than previously thought possible in this type of area. The children impacted by the intervention achieved significantly higher total composite scores in literacy and numeracy compared to those in the control group. Using the commonly-used test score standard deviation, or "SD" metric,

children in villages randomly assigned to receive the intervention scored 3.2 SD better than children in villages randomly assigned to serve as controls.

Mastering these skills is a key predictor of ultimate literacy and numeracy at this critical juncture of the middle of a child's primary schooling career. The study demonstrates that children can be taught to read fluently and do basic maths very well even in extremely poor and hard to reach places, places where, otherwise, very few people will ever gain these skills.

There were several key elements which made the project a success. It brought together multiple prongs known to be effective in isolation, combining them in a way that educators thought would make a difference, alongside providing the required resourcing to implement the project successfully.

The use of "para teachers" to teach after school lessons was central. Para teachers are people from the village itself or nearby, who have never previously trained as teachers. The point of this is to make sure we worked with people who had ties to the local areas and so were extra motivated to help the particular children they worked with.

They were hired to teach remedial, after school classes using scripted and structured lessons. These lessons took place 6 days a week for 3 years and the structured lesson plans gave teachers extra guidance on what to teach in every small increment of time. The point of this was to give these previously untrained teachers the scaffolding they need to teach effectively, right from the start of the project. These lessons were designed to complement the national curriculum and were intersected by bi-monthly and six-monthly assessments of students' progress.

The project also provided extensive monitoring of teachers, sending monitors to visit them multiple times per month and focusing on improving teacher skill and student learning during each session. This type of hands-on monitoring (as opposed to monitoring which simply checks to see if the teachers are present, and then moves on) is called "coaching" and its point was to help teachers teach well and grow as professionals.

IMPACT & FUTURE OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT

Given the success achieved so far, the project has proceeded on two fronts. Implementers continue the work in all study villages, expanding the intervention to controls as well while also bringing it to small villages in another of the country's regions. Effective Interventions are working with the government to mainstream the key lessons into national primary education priorities and policies.

This case study was provided by Effective Intervention¹¹³

ACTION TRACK 3

ENGAGE STRATEGICALLY WITH BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL PARTNERS TO DRIVE FOCUS ON FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING

Multilateral organisations offer opportunities to maximise the impact of UK ODA on the foundational learning of children in some of the world's lowest-income and most challenging contexts. Organisations such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), Education Cannot Wait (ECW) and the World Bank often have the ability to work on a far greater scale and with greater resources than any one government. Yet these strengths can also contribute to weaknesses which, in the past, have resulted in strategic incoherence and insufficient prioritisation on foundational learning. More recently, the World Bank has largely been an exception to this, having spearheaded the Accelerator Programme¹¹⁴ (with FCDO support) and the Learning Data Compact¹¹⁵.

Though GPE has shown improvements in learning outcomes in a majority of countries it has partnered with between 2010-15 and 2015-19, current rates of improvement have not been sufficient or consistent enough to meet required progress to achieve SDG 4.1.¹¹⁶ the SDG 4 indicator which targets minimum proficiency in literacy and numeracy - and overall learning levels remain low in GPE partner countries. Data collection has also been a major challenge, with only 29 of 60 GPE partner countries being able to collate quality learning assessment data between 2015-2020¹¹⁷. Further, though learning was GPE's largest investment area in 2020, only 36% of its funding was allocated to activities primarily aimed at improving learning¹¹⁸. Equally, though 100% of ECW programmes (with available data) report a positive impact on learning outcomes for crisis-affected girls in 2020¹¹⁹, there are similar issues to GPE with slower-than-required rates of progress and only 40% of its programmes are able to produce high quality data on learning outcomes improvement¹²⁰. Overall, the evidence suggests that like many bilateral "donors", the challenge remains for multilaterals like GPE, the World Bank and ECW to produce significant improvements to foundational learning outcomes for children *at scale*¹²¹. As part of this, tracking learning outcomes and data collection issues are familiar challenges.

Though noteworthy efforts are being made at multilaterals, it is clear that much more needs to be done in order to maximise their impact on the learning crisis. Given its status as consistently one of the largest bilateral "donors" to these organisations and its board-level membership, the UK Government must use its voice to call for multilaterals to do more to put learning first. This should include demanding not only greater multilateral funding allocations for programmes specifically focused on improving foundational learning outcomes but also greater accountability for, and measurement of, impact. Historically, a major barrier to the collection of

better data to track children's learning progress has been the lack of internationally-agreed upon metrics for measurement¹²². This is an issue that the FCDO itself has explicitly identified as a key barrier to its own data collection across its basic education programmes¹²³. There is an opportunity here for the UK to become a champion for the establishment and adoption of such commonly-agreed metrics for measurement of education services impact on learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy.

In summary, ICAI has noted that the UK has been a 'leading donor... in terms of both financing and policy leadership' in its engagement with multilaterals such as GPE, ECW and the World Bank, particularly on girls' education¹²⁴. It is now time for the UK Government to emulate this with regard to foundational learning. It is already making strong progress in this area which is very welcome but opportunities remain to build on its existing record of engagement in order to build the pressure for greater emphasis on better foundational learning programming and improved data collection at these organisations.

9**RECOMMENDATION 9**

To maximise the impact of UK's basic education work and support locally-led programming, the FCDO should immediately reverse its ban on the hiring of foreign nationals.

To its credit, the UK Government alongside the United States, has already been among the stronger "donor" voices calling for an increased focus on foundational learning at multilateral organisations over recent years. As mentioned, the UK Government retains significant influence on multilateral organisations and, given the urgency and scale of the learning crisis, it is clear that the UK must sustain and increase the role it plays in driving greater collective ambition to address it. As part of this, the UK should work diplomatically to encourage other countries to echo its calls for greater emphasis on foundational learning in multilateral fora. This September's Transforming Education Summit provides an excellent opportunity to put this into practice. It is important that the major multilaterals are not repeatedly hearing from the same countries on the same issue, but instead hear from a chorus of nations all calling for the same priorities on learning. Though this is especially powerful when coming from the countries experiencing the worst levels of learning poverty, the UK can also do more diplomatically to draw in support from a wider range of high-income countries.

10**RECOMMENDATION 10**

The UK should use opportunities such as the Transforming Education Summit to work with other donors to prioritise investment in foundational literacy and numeracy, and encourage them to join the UK in holding multilaterals to account on their investments in this area.

THE POWER OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP ON FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING: THE EXAMPLES OF VIETNAM, PERU AND CEARÁ, BRAZIL

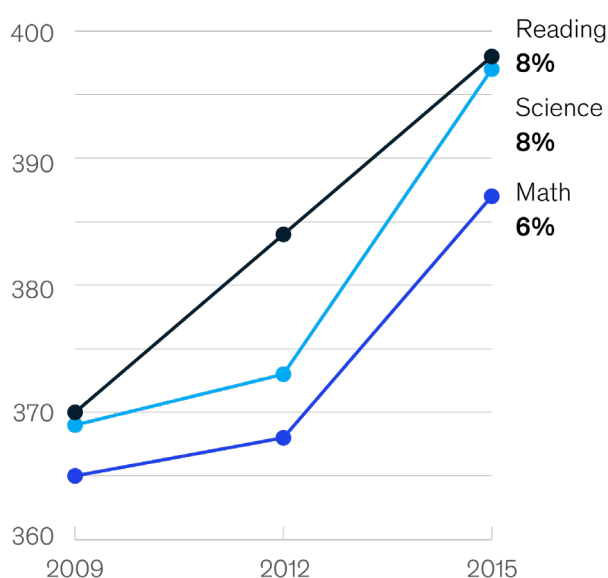
CASE STUDY

Though the scale of the learning crisis can be daunting, the cases of Peru, Vietnam and Ceará state in Brazil, demonstrate that when foundational literacy and numeracy becomes a political priority, rapid learning gains can be made in a relatively short period of time.

In 2012, Vietnam gained worldwide acclaim after it ranked 17th in the world for numeracy and 19th for reading out of 65 countries in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), outranking OECD countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom¹²⁵, despite having a far smaller economy¹²⁶. This followed several years of sustained government investment in improving literacy and numeracy levels, and the adoption of policy reforms aimed at improving teaching quality and integrating successful elements from other comparable countries' education systems¹²⁷. Test scores for grade 5

students in mathematics increased a substantial 0.40 standard deviations in a period of just 6 years between 2001 and 2007, whilst for Vietnamese language tests, a 0.22 standard deviation increase was achieved over the same period¹²⁸. This 2000 to 2020 period saw Vietnam expand its rate of youth literacy (age 15-30) from 94% to 99% over that period as the country's commitment to foundational skills bore fruit¹²⁹.

Peru Education Quality Improvements
PISA Assessment Score



Source: McKinsey & Company; Chen et al

Peru, which came last of 65 countries in the 2012 PISA assessment in which Vietnam did so well, has undergone a remarkable transformation since¹³⁰. Up to 2010, Peru had been spending just 3% of GDP on education, well below the

international benchmark of 4-6%¹³¹ which several of its Latin American neighbours were already meeting. Though access to education in Peru had increased, teacher salaries had fallen substantially and lesson quality declined¹³². Following the country's poor showing in the 2012 PISA assessment, Jaime Saavedra, Peru's new education minister, took ownership of the challenge, implementing a series of reforms and increased government investment in education. These reforms were designed to increase focus on foundational learning and science, improve education system management, increase social value of teaching and closing infrastructure gaps¹³³. Alongside this, Peru increased spending on education to 4% of GDP. These reforms quickly garnered strong results. In a period of just three years between 2012-2015, Peru achieved the fourth largest improvement in learning outcomes of all PISA countries and the highest in Latin America with its maths and reading assessment scores increasing by 5% and 4% respectively¹³⁴.

Another foundational learning success story can be told of Ceará state in Brazil. It was among the lowest-income of Brazil's states in 2005 and ranked in the bottom half of the country's states for education quality. By 2017, the state achieved vast improvements to literacy and numeracy assessment scores and became the top ranked state in Brazil adjusted for economic status. Independent research identified sustained political prioritisation and commitment to ending learning poverty for all children as being among the defining factors in the transformation in the state's achievements¹³⁵. The state now has the lowest rates of learning poverty in the country¹³⁶.

What is the underlying success factor here? The message is clear. Despite general stagnation or decline in many countries in learning levels¹³⁷, the cases of Vietnam, Peru and Ceará demonstrate that there are exceptions to the rule from which inspiration can be drawn. A clear theme running through all these success stories and borne out in the findings of academic research analysing success factors across multiple counties, is that sustained political motivation and investment in improving literacy and numeracy levels are central to transforming results¹³⁸. This is of course applicable and central to the UK's role as a "donor" investing in education programmes, and as a partner for other country governments and multilateral organisations.

EDUCATION CANNOT WAIT

Despite the challenges ECW faces with regard to data collection on foundational learning outcomes in the challenging operating environments it works in, and the scale of the challenge on learning poverty, it has already signalled that there will be an increased emphasis on foundational learning as part of its soon-to-be-released 2023-26 strategy. As part of this, ECW is also exploring new opportunities to increase its capacity to monitor the impact of its work on learning outcomes.

ECW remains the world's foremost and best-placed multilateral organisation for the delivery of quality education for children in emergencies and protracted crises. Stabilising and improving the foundational learning of the millions of children affected by conflict and displacement is a mammoth challenge but it is one that will be a significant ECW priority for the 2023-26 period and beyond. Though there is clear scope for improvement, it has already achieved some notable results. ECW's 2021 results report highlighted strong evidence of improved foundational learning outcomes in five of its programmes, including in Somalia, Nigeria and Uganda¹³⁹. ECW has reported partial increases in learning outcomes in a further 17 programmes it supports, with no reported examples of decreased levels¹⁴⁰. With a renewed and increased focus on learning as part of its upcoming strategy, it is therefore crucial that the UK Government remains a reliable partner of ECW by pledging ambitiously for the organisation's upcoming 2023-26 replenishment and maximising its diplomatic abilities to ensure other governments do the same.

11**RECOMMENDATION 11**

The UK should pledge ambitiously to Education Cannot Wait at its upcoming replenishment and utilise its diplomatic capacity to encourage other countries to do the same.

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