SAVE OUR FUTURE

Background Paper 1:

Education in Crisis

About the campaign

Save Our Future is a global coalition of diverse voices - from CSOs to the private sector, youth to researchers, media to multilaterals, foundations to influences and more - all uniting to deliver a simple, yet powerful message amidst the COVID-19 crisis: **Save Our Future.**

This campaign, supported by hundreds of organizations worldwide, is driving awareness and emphasizing the connection between education and advancing the other UN Sustainable Development goals; showcasing education solutions and innovations backed by evidence-based research; bringing together communities and diverse stakeholders to promote collaboration; and engaging people around the world in a dialogue around education to ensure all children can learn.

As part of the Save Our Future campaign, the Save Our Future White Paper *Averting an Education Catastrophe for the World's Children* was developed and launched on October 22, with key actions and recommendations for global decisionmakers on protecting and prioritizing education amidst COVID-19.

For further information, please contact campaign@saveourfuture.world. To learn more about the Save Our Future campaign, please visit www.saveourfuture.world.

Background paper prepared for the Save Our Future white paper *Averting an Education Catastrophe for the World's Children*

Education in Crisis

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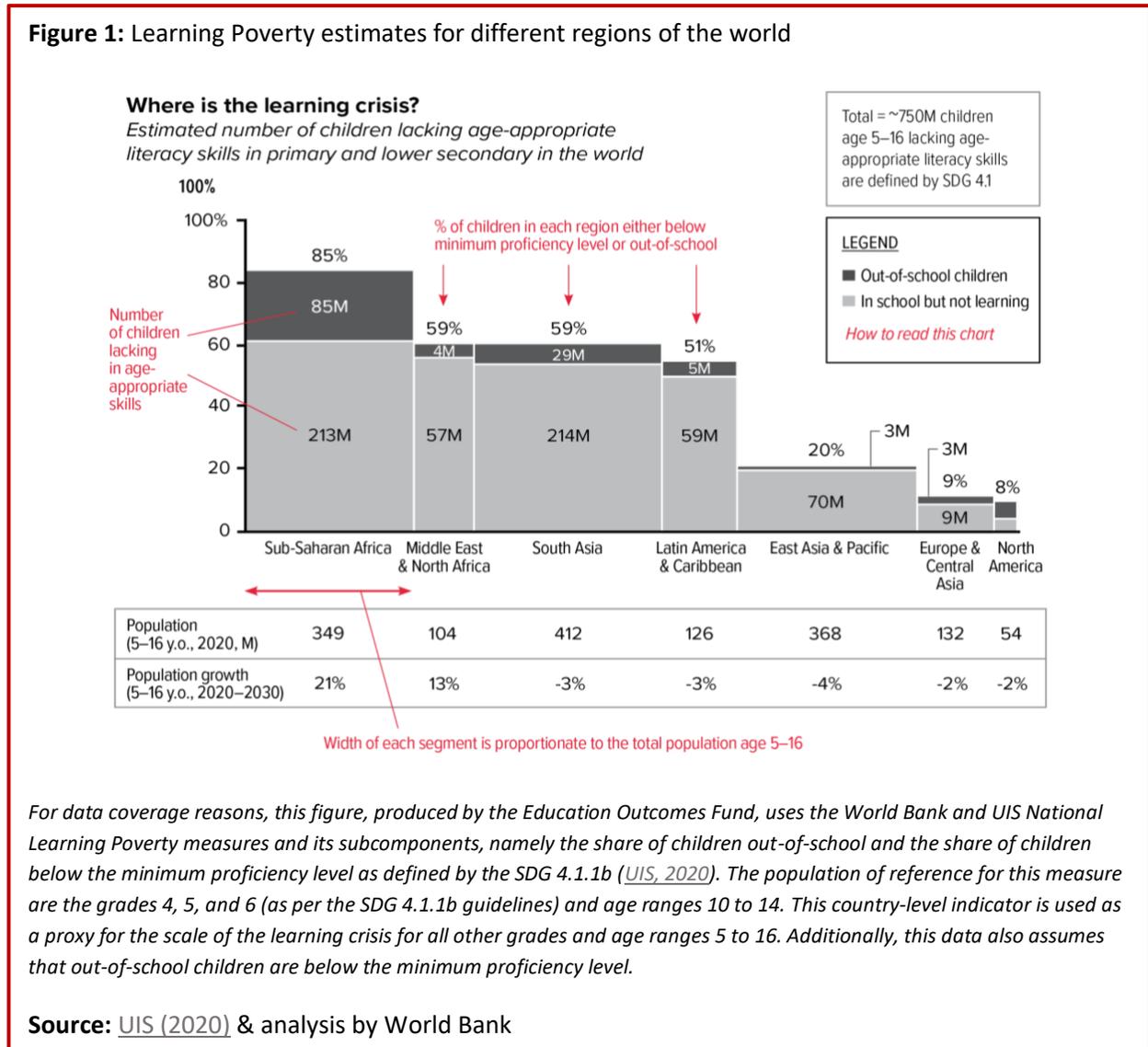
Introduction

COVID-19 has disrupted education systems across the world, forcing school closures that have persisted since early March 2020. At the peak of the crisis, it is estimated that over 1.5 billion learners around the world were affected by school closures (UNESCO, 2020a). These closures have highlighted and magnified various socio-economic vulnerabilities plaguing education systems worldwide, with deeply unequal impacts for disadvantaged groups, and consequences that threaten to derail global progress made in the sector. Globally, education stakeholders have been channeling effort toward adapting technology to mitigate the pandemic-induced learning losses and managing the negative impact on global gains in expanded access to education. However, with the urgency surrounding the pandemic, there is a substantial risk that attention will be diverted from the fundamental pre-pandemic learning crisis. First, vast numbers of children in low-income countries were not in school, and second, the majority of pre-pandemic in-school children were not learning at the expected levels. The COVID-19 pandemic has had unprecedented direct impact on education systems through school closures and associated learning loss, but the pandemic also threatens to have an even more devastating and long-term impact for the most marginalized children who already faced the learning crisis pre- pandemic.

The scale of the learning crisis

The global learning crisis affects billions of people, directly and indirectly. Beyond the glaring number of 258 million out of school children (UNESCO, 2020b), for the students that attend school, there is overwhelming evidence that there are much lower learning levels than expected. For example, World Bank's Learning Poverty data estimates that over half of children (53 percent) in low- and middle-income countries cannot read or understand a basic story after they complete primary school, usually even after five or more years of schooling (World Bank, 2019a). Statistics from UNESCO estimate that 387 million children, over half of the primary school age children worldwide, lack basic reading skills (UNESCO, 2017). In a survey conducted in Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya, 75 percent of grade 3 students could not read a simple sentence in their language of instruction (World Bank, 2018). In all 13 countries included in the I-CAN survey that measured foundational numeracy, less than 75 percent of grades 2 and 3 students were able to complete a set of foundational numeracy tasks (PAL Network, 2020). In addition, there is huge variation between locations within countries and marked socioeconomic disparities, gender and access to education. Learners in countries and communities that are most marginalized suffer the most (see Save Our Future background paper *Unlock Education for All: Focus on the Furthest Behind*). The majority of out of school children are in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. In the lowest-income countries worldwide, when looking at learning levels, statistics are even more bleak, with fewer than 15 percent of children in primary school said to be proficient in reading and math (World Bank, 2018). This raises the question of how any further learning could take place for these students, with foundational learning attainment being so low.

Learning Poverty, a concept growing out of the World Bank measurement on student learning outcomes worldwide, is defined as the number of children who cannot read and understand a simple text by the age

of 10. Figure 1 shows the staggering numbers of children affected by the learning crisis across different regions.

Figure 1: Learning Poverty estimates for different regions of the world

Where is the learning crisis?
Estimated number of children lacking age-appropriate literacy skills in primary and lower secondary in the world

Total = ~750M children age 5–16 lacking age-appropriate literacy skills are defined by SDG 4.1

% of children in each region either below minimum proficiency level or out-of-school

LEGEND
■ Out-of-school children
□ In school but not learning
How to read this chart

Number of children lacking in age-appropriate skills

	Sub-Saharan Africa	Middle East & North Africa	South Asia	Latin America & Caribbean	East Asia & Pacific	Europe & Central Asia	North America
% below/out	85%	59%	59%	51%	20%	9%	8%
Out-of-school	85M	4M	29M	5M	3M	3M	
In school not learning	213M	57M	214M	59M	70M	9M	

	Sub-Saharan Africa	Middle East & North Africa	South Asia	Latin America & Caribbean	East Asia & Pacific	Europe & Central Asia	North America
Population (5–16 y.o., 2020, M)	349	104	412	126	368	132	54
Population growth (5–16 y.o., 2020–2030)	21%	13%	-3%	-3%	-4%	-2%	-2%

Width of each segment is proportionate to the total population age 5–16

For data coverage reasons, this figure, produced by the Education Outcomes Fund, uses the World Bank and UIS National Learning Poverty measures and its subcomponents, namely the share of children out-of-school and the share of children below the minimum proficiency level as defined by the SDG 4.1.1b (UIS, 2020). The population of reference for this measure are the grades 4, 5, and 6 (as per the SDG 4.1.1b guidelines) and age ranges 10 to 14. This country-level indicator is used as a proxy for the scale of the learning crisis for all other grades and age ranges 5 to 16. Additionally, this data also assumes that out-of-school children are below the minimum proficiency level.

Source: UIS (2020) & analysis by World Bank

While these numbers are harrowing, they prompt asking what students are attending school for if such little progress towards basic literacy and numeracy is being made. The focus of the international education community has shifted in recent years from measuring input-based statistics surrounding schooling to evaluate education systems, understanding that 'schooling' and 'learning' are no longer interchangeable terms. The renewed focus is now on outcome-based statistics, such as educational attainment and learning outcomes, to measure how successful education systems are toward meeting UN Sustainable Development Goal 4. Being present in schools does not mean students are present inside classrooms and being present in classrooms does not mean student learning is taking place. In addition, although there are still improvements to be made in measurement of learning outcomes, data shows children's learning

attainment is often much lower than the age-defined grade that they are placed in (World Bank, 2018). Recording graduation rates from various grades does not guarantee that students leave those grades with the age-related learning outcomes of the curriculum. Focus has shifted to trying to understand how education systems can orient themselves to meet the level of learners. Initiatives such as Pratham's Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) and others which have been implemented elsewhere, for example, aim to remedy this (see Save Our Future background paper *From Schooling to Learning for All: Reorienting Curriculum and Targeting Instruction*).

Education experts agree that the impact of the learning crisis on hundreds of millions of children does not only impact the students in terms of their future life outcomes, including health and work-related outcomes, but the crisis directly affects the prosperity of students' families as well. Eventually, low learning levels, starting at the earliest stages in a student's life, have ripple effects that often lead to low economic growth, productivity, and stagnant knowledge economies.

The stifling effect of COVID-19 on education

Due to the detrimental effects of a combination of school closures, inadequate remote learning facilities that students may have in their homes, and limited infrastructure available to school to continue remote teaching, it is no surprise that learning losses have exacerbated during COVID-19.

When news of the pandemic began spreading, schools shut down in rapid succession with governments aiming to reduce the virus spreading in crowded classrooms and schools. At the height of the first wave of COVID-19 cases around March-April 2020, UNESCO estimated approximately 1.6 billion students across the world were affected by school closures (UNESCO, 2020a). More than 180 countries closed their schools nationwide (Winthrop, 2020), students lost access to their classrooms, school communities, contact with peers and friends, and other vital services such as daily meals and access to water and sanitation services that may have been available to while physically in school.

Countries have had varied responses about how to respond to school closures for the new school year. To date (August 2020), many countries have kept their schools closed, opting to open their school systems again in early 2021. In Kenya, the government has decided that their students will repeat an entire school year altogether, reopening in February 2021 (Dahir, 2020). The decision is said to try and address the inequalities in learning that arose as a result of school closures, where some students had access to remote learning but others did not (Dahir, 2020). In countries where the pandemic spread has not been as severe, or where the 'curve' of COVID-19 cases has largely been flattened, schools have already begun reopening (UNESCO, 2020a). In Thailand, for example, school began opening in July 2020 as safety measures such as masks and temperature checks were put in place, and it had been over a month since any cases of local transmission of the COVID-19 virus were reported (Reuters, 2020). In some countries, such as South Africa, a rise in cases meant that schools closed again after being open for a brief period of time (Al Jazeera, 2020).

These wide scale but 'temporary' school closures are just part the global learning crisis which affects hundreds of millions of children. Schooling does not equate to learning, and even if many schools across the world were to remain open, the quality of education delivered would not necessarily mean students are meeting their own full potential, or even grade-level requirements that have been set by national or local curricula as one may expect. The detrimental effects of learning losses caused by school will continue to have effects in decades to come, as learning losses affect future life outcomes of students, including health, earnings and income stability, which in turn will greatly affect many countries' economies.

The crucial questions remain: *how much learning will students lose out on, how long will it take for learning to recover, and how long will the effects last?* Before those questions are addressed, it is important to recognize the scale of the learning crisis globally for children is so drastic, that compounded with the impact that COVID-19 pandemic-related closures, learning levels will drastically fall further.

Figure 2 examines the World Bank's Learning Poverty data, which estimates the number of children aged 10 who are not able to read or understand a simple story. The global estimates for this number are as high as 53 percent globally, including in-school children, as well as estimates for out-of-school children (World Bank, 2019a).

Figure 2: Estimates of children in Learning Poverty

Children are considered to be in *learning poverty* if they reach age 10 without being able to read a simple text or are out of school. Most children who cannot read by age 10 never master reading.

For every 100 primary school-age children in low- and middle-income countries:

53 were already in learning poverty before the pandemic (of which 9 were out of school and the rest were in school but not learning)

10 more will enter learning poverty as a result of COVID (of which almost all will be in school but not learning)
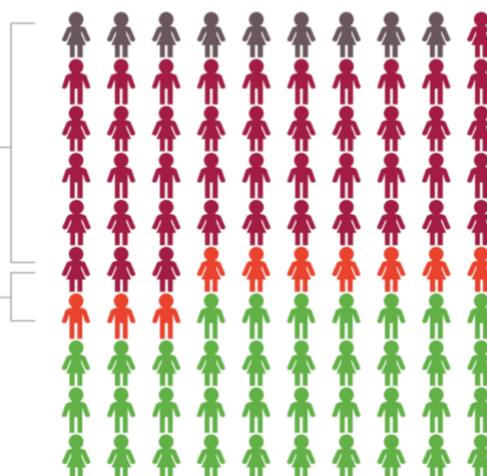
Based on simulations by the World Bank Learning Poverty team and UNESCO's Institute of Statistics (UIS). Out of the 53% of children in learning poverty, 44% are in-school children who fail to meet minimum proficiency and 9% are out-of-school children. The World Bank team estimates that, as of August 2020, an additional 10.5% children will enter learning poverty in 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic closures, out of which 10.2% will be children in school and 0.3% will be children out-of-school. The team's estimates are from their 'pessimistic' simulation projection as per Azevedo (2020). UIS estimates the increase of children below the minimum proficiency at the end of primary is 7.6%, but this does not include out-of-school children and uses different assumptions regarding mitigation and remediation effectiveness.

Source: Analysis by World Bank Learning Poverty team, UIS, and Education Commission (2020)

The data around learning loss projections is relatively sparse and based on econometric estimations. However, there are examples from past other experiences of prolonged school closures that can be studied. One way to estimate learning losses is using time out of school between academic years, or what is called "summer learning loss". A study in Malawi found reductions of 0.38 standard deviations across several measures of foundational literacy across two grade transition periods (Slade, et al., 2017). A recent estimate from Ghana shows that children are likely to suffer up to 60 percent of the learning gains during the previous period as a result of the transition. Moreover, these learning losses are likely to be greater for children of linguistic minorities, as well as for those who do not have access to learning support and resources at home (Sabates et al., 2020).

Another way estimation of learning loss is via school closures resulting from natural disasters or other health crises. For example, analysis on the school closures resulting from the 2005 earthquakes in northern Pakistan showed that a 14-week school closure resulted in learning losses of 1.5 school years for children between the ages of 3-15 years old (Andrabi et al., 2020). Unlike the simulations attempting to predict learning losses caused by the COVID-19-related school closures, this data is not a prediction and gives us an understanding of the direct effects of school closures.

Another example is to examine what happened when schools in West and Central Africa that were closed due to the Ebola outbreak in late 2013. In Sierra Leone, school closures for the 2014-2015 school year led to a 16 percent reduction in enrollment rates in rural areas when schools opened again (Rasul et al., 2020). Students lost an entire year of attending school, as they were shut for approximately eight months, but we know the learning-adjusted years of schooling (see Filmer, et al., 2018 for a full definition of learning-adjusted years of schooling) students lost was even greater (Azzi-Huck & Powers, 2016).

Beyond learning, experts also analyze the effect that learning losses could have on wider economic impacts. Higher learning gains and more schooling are generally assumed to produce better life outcomes, including better wage and work-related outcomes. Thus, given the exacerbated effects of learning losses during this COVID-19 pandemic, and the increase in student learning losses will likely have an increased effect on future earnings of students.

The World Bank estimates that USD $10 trillion[1] could be lost due to the lessening of lifetime wages these learning losses will have, which amounts to 1/10th of global GDP (Azevedo et al., 2020). This effect has been estimated largely on the assumption that 0.6 years of learning years will be lost due to the pandemic, which roughly equates to $16,000 of wage losses for students over the course of their lives, estimated through an intermediate scenario created.

While the estimate may be on the higher side, it draws attention to the scale of what learning losses mean in economic terms. As discussed, in addition to school closures and uncertainty about reopening, the learning crisis was already severe in many parts of the world. Examining non-pandemic related causes of this is also key.

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[1] All financing figures and estimates used in this paper are calculated and/or provided in US Dollars

Unpacking the learning crisis

Acquiring a deep understanding of the multidimensional problems that underscore the crisis is a crucial - and often bypassed - step toward addressing it. At its core, poor learning outcomes are a result of failures that are entrenched within three interlinked and interdependent tiers of the education service delivery chain: (1) school-level, (2) national-level, and (3) global architecture that create the ecosystem for conducive learning. This section provides an overview of key challenges confronting learning across the aforementioned tiers.

School level: The disconnect between teaching and learning

Fundamentally, learning is the process that occurs as a result of the interactions between teachers and students at the school level. However, creating the link between schooling and equitable learning is a complex process that encompasses the following key components: who has access to learning, the quality of teachers, what is being taught, and how it is taught.

Who has access - inclusion and diversity

The failure to address inequalities, discrimination, and marginalization linked to gender, socio-economic background, disability, language, and location is intensifying the learning crisis. A study on the profile of out of school children in Nigeria found that the most excluded are students from rural areas, poor households, and those in conflict-affected northern Nigeria (Adeniran et al., 2020). Gender disparities in access have narrowed significantly, but in some countries, enrollment for girls still lags behind boys; in South Sudan, girls account for 39 percent of students in schools, while boys account for about 61 percent, (Bol Elijah Bul, 2019). Only 2 in 3 countries have achieved gender parity in access to education, and in sub-Saharan Africa, the ratio of out of school boys to girls is 100 to 123.

Children with disabilities are also overrepresented in the out of school population and have far lower literacy rates. In India, children with disabilities are five and a half times more likely to be out of school, with children with blindness (over half never enroll) and mental illness (two-thirds never enroll) being the most likely to be excluded (UNESCO, 2015). A survey in Tanzania found that the literacy rate for people with a disability was 52 percent, compared to 75 percent for people without a disability (UNESCO, 2014). Findings from UNESCO reveal that in low- and middle-income countries, children with a disability were 19 percent less likely to achieve minimum proficiency in reading than those without a disability (UNESCO, 2020c).

In terms of education spending, public finances are usually allocated in ways that exclude poor and marginalized students, especially at the secondary school level. For example, in Zambia, approximately 39 percent of spending on secondary education is allocated to the richest fifth of households, as compared to 8 percent for the poorest fifth (World Bank, 2018). See Save Our Future background paper *Unlock Education for All: Focus on the Furthest Behind* for further analysis on equitable allocation of funding and resources.

In the majority of low-income countries, there has not been inclusive access to schools for all children, and in countries where there is access, there has not been meaningful diversity within the classroom. Exclusion continues to dominate life both outside and inside schools, where markers of disadvantages in society are replicated within schools.

Teacher quality

Globally, it is estimated that **69 million additional teachers are required to achieve access to universal primary and secondary education (SDG4) by 2030**, with sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia accounting for over 75 percent of this requirement (UIS, 2016). For the teachers who are currently working, many are unqualified, have poor knowledge of pedagogy, and are sometimes absent from class. One study in sub-Saharan Africa found that less than 10 percent of primary school teachers demonstrated a minimum level of subject knowledge skills to teach grade 4 students (Bold et al., 2017), and another revealed that less than 25 percent of sub-Saharan African teachers have complete secondary education (World Bank, 2018). Unannounced visits to primary schools in six countries across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and South America revealed that on average, in public schools, about 19 percent of teachers were absent, and in instances where teachers were present, many were not teaching (Chaudhury et al., 2006).

The challenge of teacher quality is more complex than it is often painted in the literature. Poor teacher quality is reflective of systemic failures within education systems. Within countries, teachers have to deal with limited pre-service training and few opportunities for professional development. Teachers are tasked with teaching curriculums that are too advanced for their subject content knowledge and have to manage a level of classroom diversity that exceeds their pedagogical knowledge. Essentially, teachers are having to perform within education systems that are not designed for learning.

What is taught - curriculum mismatch

Curriculum is critical to learning because it specifies what teachers are expected to teach and what the students are expected to learn as they move through the education system. In many low-income countries, the curricula are unsuitable and overambitious, and children are not meeting the learning levels or learning too little. A study conducted in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa found that poor learning outcomes are in part the result of curricula pace that far outpaces actual learning for the majority of students (Pritchett & Beatty, 2012). This gap between curricula and student learning is compounded by the fact that teachers are often ill-equipped to teach the curriculum, resulting in poor learning outcomes cumulatively for students. In Nigeria, a recent study found that curriculum pace is far above the skill and ability level of the majority of children; 17 and 31 percent of students in the study were not learning what the curricula defined for their grades in literacy and numeracy, respectively (Adeniran et al., 2020). In India, grade 9 students are lagging far behind grade level competencies, with the average student still mastering skills at grades 2 and 3 (Dhar et al., 2020).

There is evidence that slowing the pace and content of curricula is beneficial for learning. An evaluation of a curriculum reform in Tanzania that simplified the content and pace of the curriculum found that the reform increased learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy across the board. Additionally, the study

found that there were no differential effects by gender or location, and no negative effects for top achieving students (Mbiti & Rodriguez-Segura, forthcoming).

How teaching occurs

Education systems across low-income countries have been known to mimic countries in the global north, both in terms of what and how they teach. In this situation, teaching methods are adapted to resemble other global north countries, as opposed to adapting for success given the local context and feasibility (Turczynowicz et al., 2017). This is evident in several aspects of teaching, especially in language of instruction, timing of teaching, the narrow definition of learning, and the lack of inclusive pedagogy and more interactive approaches to teaching educational content.

In many countries, the mother tongue is replaced by English or French before students fully gain mastery. UNESCO estimates that 40 percent of school-aged children do not have access to education in a language they understand (UNESCO, 2016). Findings reveal that even in middle- and high-income countries, students who were taught in a language other than their mother tongues typically scored 34 percent below native speakers in reading tests (UNESCO, 2020c).

According to data collected by from Afghanistan, India, Sudan (Darfur State), Sierra Leone, Morocco and Tunisia, marginalized children, particularly children with disabilities, are increasingly accessing schools and education in low-income countries, but are not learning effectively due to social exclusion within the classroom and out-of-date teaching methods that perpetuate inequality (The Impact Initiative, 2018). In general, teaching methods are rigid (Mupa & Chinooneka, 2015) with limited scope to account for differences in student preparedness and ability (Damon et al., 2018).

Schools provide the primary level of engagement for learning, however, improving the connection between schooling and learning at the school level is only a small part of a larger transformation required in education. If a key objective is to improve learning, all of the aforementioned components become more powerful when they are embedded in an ecosystem designed to support, augment, and to prioritize learning.

Systems-level: Incoherence in the broader education system

An education system is a product of a series of complex relationships between several actors (teachers, students, parents, civil service organizations, administrators), interacting with each other in different contexts and capacities, and at different levels (schools vs. government). The education system defines the input that is used to achieve education objectives. Therefore, to achieve desired learning outcomes, the underlying relationships and components of the education system needs to be intentionally aligned and designed to work for learning for all students. Unfortunately, across many low-income countries, there is incoherence in the education system, resulting in a lack of alignment and coordination on policies, programs, and demands on students, teachers, and the education system.

Mismatch between learning outcomes and mechanisms of accountability

Across low-income countries, while education systems have a few components that facilitate learning, the systems are mostly coherent with mechanisms of accountability that promote logistical aspects of education (enrollment). The incentives and motivations of system actors are often not linked directly to learning. For example, head teachers in India believe that the most important indicators of good schools are observable inputs such as buildings, geographical accessibility, and the availability of teaching materials. Only 11 percent of head teachers believe that learning outcomes and exam results are the most important indicator of a good school (Mbiti, 2016). Poor emphasis on learning also means that there has been a lack of accurate and credible data on learning, obscuring the poor quality of education (World Bank, 2018). The repercussions are manifold, including poor school management and governance and unclear information channels and pathways of accountability.

Politics within nations also intensifies the misalignments in education systems. Education systems involve multiple actors including politicians, private players, and bureaucrats, where each actor has vested interests in how the system should work. This often results in systems where there are multiple actors with contradictory interests that affect education at every level - from setting policy goals to implementing and evaluating them.

As a result, low performance on learning has persisted despite deliberate efforts because education systems are trapped in a low-accountability, low-level equilibrium. Improving learning outcomes will require updating accountability systems of education to ensure they align with components of learning (Pritchett, 2015).

Inadequate use of available funding

Government funding to education is often inadequate, but more debilitating is that available funds are often not utilized effectively. Availability of more funding will only increase outcomes where funding is utilized effectively and intentionally to improve learning outcomes for all students, especially the most marginalized. Government funding is often allocated in ways that excludes marginalized children (UNICEF, 2020). In most cases, funds do not reach the neediest schools (World Bank, 2018) and when they do, they are geared toward increasing access, often without regard for efficiency (Mbiti, 2016). For example, in Guinea, Central African Republic, and Senegal, children from the richest households receive 8.9 percent, 6.2 percent, and 4.6 percent times respectively the amount of public education spending compared to children from the poorest households (UNICEF, 2020). Decisions on the use of public spending are often not coherently aligned with learning needs, and stringent rules governing the funds leave little room for schools to tailor the funds to the specific needs of their schools and students (World Bank, 2018). See Save Our Future background paper *Unlock Education for All: Focus on the Furthest Behind* for additional analysis on domestic spending towards the most marginalized.

Narrow focus on inputs

The myopic focus in the global community on driving education access has resulted in education systems that routinely focus and report on enrollment, but not on learning. As a result, learning levels were not an important indicator for education progress, meaning they were of little relevance to country-level policymakers (World Bank, 2018). The routine of defining education in terms of its inputs has led to priorities such as hiring more teachers without simultaneously building teacher capacity. Improvements to logistics long overshadowed shockingly low levels of learning.

Global: Poor systemic thinking

Uncovering the barriers that sustain low-learning levels in low-income countries would be incomplete without admission of a degree of culpability by the architects of the global education system. The global architects, at the helm of which are the donors, experts, and policymakers in the global north, have defined the blueprint and set the priorities that inform the failing national education systems in the global north. These failings are reflective of the poor institutional and systemic thinking that have trickled down from the global level. The key issues at the global level are summarized below.

A narrow focus on the logistical aspects of learning

The present framework for addressing education challenges places a narrow focus on achieving quantitative goals, such as driving access to primary education or building schools, resulting in the neglect of other crucial aspects of education such as improving the quality of learning. As global agenda setters that determine who gets access to funding, this emphasis on driving access has resulted in national education systems that design policies and programs that deliver mass schooling but not learning.

Top-down program-based approach to aid

The top-down approach to delivering development support and aid to countries in the global north has largely failed because it has tended to prioritize donor priorities over local needs and has overlooked the broken link between top-level policy implementation and on-the-ground results (Yoshida & van der Walt, 2017). This has largely resulted in poor execution and implementation that have been ineffective across low-income countries. For example, an evaluation of a program called Computers for Education that aimed to integrate computers into teaching of languages in public schools revealed that the program succeeded at increasing the number of computers in public schools and training on how to use the computers, but had little effect on students' outcomes because teachers were not incorporating the computers into their curriculum (Barrera-Osorio & Linden, 2009). Even well-researched programs that have generally been known to work have failed to scale in instances where they have not been contextualized because the barriers to learning are not always the same. For example, an evaluation of a program to increase an Indian community's participation in their education system by giving local people control over resource allocation revealed no impact on community involvement in public schools or on student learning outcomes (Banerjee et al., 2010). This top-down approach has engendered a practice of providing generalized solutions, despite a poor understanding of local barriers to learning.

Overly fragmented and competing programs

Education systems across low-income countries receive considerable financial support from global donors. Unfortunately, aid in the sector is fragmented and ineffective at making holistic, long-term contributions to development because support is usually tied to specific donor-led vertical programs and projects and restricted to narrowly specified inputs. Most countries have a large number of donors working concurrently; however, donors work in isolation, prioritizing different programs aimed at addressing the same problems and competing for recognition. Poor donor harmonization stifles efforts towards building coherence in educational systems at the national level because donor activities don't take into consideration how individual improvements affect national sector-wide goals.

Poor ongoing monitoring and evaluation

There is a dearth of information on what actually works to drive learning because rigorous evaluations of the impact of programs are rarely conducted in a timely, coherent manner. In instances where they are conducted, evaluations are based on program activities and inputs (for example, providing computers) as opposed to outcomes and results, occur too late in the program cycle to improve project outcomes, and are usually conducted by the same organizations that implement the programs (Easterly, 2007). Monitoring in general is also poor due to the fragmented and program-specific nature of donor funds, where data collection, sharing, and processing is usually vertically fragmented.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has illuminated an already pervasive learning crisis around the world that threatens to leave hundreds of millions of children without the basic skills needed to live healthy, productive, and fulfilling lives. Without urgent action, improved coordination and efficiency, and systems-level transformation, the current education crisis could turn into an education catastrophe and have rippling effects for generations to come. The other Save Our Future background papers begin to lay out an agenda for action, with specific recommendations for stakeholders across the education ecosystem. These actions have contributed to the seven Action Areas in the Save Our Future white paper *Averting an Education Catastrophe for the World's Children*.

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