

Comments on EFA FTI Global and Regional Activities Program (GRA) Consultation Document, Draft 2.

Thematic Area: Learning Outcomes

Anda Adams | The Brookings Institution

Response to Proposed Activities in Revised GRA Paper on Learning Outcomes

General Response. Overall, the revised document represents a substantial improvement in how the FTI GRA program is approaching the area of learning outcomes. The background section is much clearer in its overall approach to learning levels and the inequities in learning globally, as well as the areas of particular concern, thereby establishing clear rationale for how GRA program will seek to address learning outcomes. While some countries are already beginning to scale up activities to address the learning crisis (which the FTI should be focused on sharing among its networks), it will be important to simultaneously try new approaches so as to avoid pursuing a one-size-fits-all approach to education reform. As the FTI partnership continues to grow, the individual national (and even sub-national) contexts increasingly vary (rather than converge) and a broader and deeper knowledge base will be essential. Simultaneously, proven models must continue to be considered for scale up within countries so that a focus on research-based interventions is not at the expense of taking proven activities to scale in order to impact more children sooner. Striking the right balance between research and implementation is essential, yet not simple.

1. **Refinement of Indicators.** This is clearly an area that FTI has already played a leadership role and for which there is demand for coherence among the various education stakeholders, both to simplify the process for reporting countries and to help communicate a clear message of progress and gaps, especially outside of the education community. The shift to focusing on comprehension is right and positions the exercise of creating global-level indicators within a frame that works with individual national and linguistic contexts. This work should also be used to inform the debate around the next global development agenda following the expiration of the MDGs in 2015. Understanding that this program cycle is focused on now through 2013, it is understandable to focus on the literacy component. However, toward the end of that period, it should be feasible to begin doing the necessary background research and expert consultation to move forward with considering indicators for mathematics and/or critical thinking. Furthermore,
2. **Repository of Data on Indicators.** Again, this is an area where FTI can add value to work already being undertaken by institutions by focusing on serving as a primary link between the global aggregators of data and the individual country partners with whom FTI-S works directly. As stated in the paper, it is important that FTI play a role in ensuring that working at the global level should not replace the focus on utilization of such data in classrooms to improve teaching and learning. The system established for collecting indicators on early literacy and numeracy must be compatible with learning outcomes more broadly as some level of understanding of learning levels throughout the education system is necessary to avoid creating gaps within the system.
3. **Literature Reviews and Knowledge Packaging.** This list of areas for research is ambitious, especially given the less than 3 year time span (2011-2013) for this GRA program cycle. While the paper acknowledges that some topics will be addressed in more depth than others, it remains a long list with individual topics being complex in and of themselves. Allocating sufficient funds to adequately address all of them may be hard to do. However, none of the topics appear unnecessary in terms of further knowledge generation; the approach to working on them is an important aspect of moving forward. While responses to the Requests for Results Partnerships may drive how and which areas are resources, this demand cannot be the sole determinant of fulfilling this agenda and therefore the FTI may need to set a priority list or establish a set of criteria for prioritizing the work. Given that none of the topics fall egregiously outside the areas that need further attention, what follows are a few specific comments on the approach:
 - a. **Requests for Results Partnership.** In finding partners to lead on carrying out this work, a system for how work is distributed among partners should be established, with particular attention to balancing initial partner offers to participate with the a need to ensure that multiple perspectives and experiences are evaluated and included in the knowledge

packaging. This is especially important in areas that may be considered more controversial or for which there is more than one proven approach. FTI has expressed that it will not promote a single approach in the case of instruction in early grades; this should be similarly applied to other areas, including early childhood development, teacher training methods, and assessment. In this way, sufficient outreach to existing partners and new partners should be a core focus on FTI's initial GRA work to get beyond the "usual suspects" to ensure that innovative and proven techniques and approaches are shared. There may be scope within USAID's Grand Challenge to assist with wide outreach. It is essential that the literature reviews and knowledge-sharing accurately represent the breadth of individuals and organizations working on these issues in their various spheres of influence. The FTI should uphold its label as a partnership and caution against any single entity being the sole or primary source of knowledge. This is a responsibility of the FTI to uphold, but also of the partnership to actively and willingly participate.

- b. **Setting Shared Research Agendas.** Generally, the lists of research questions identified within the individuals areas are fairly extensive and already represent a contribution to the field. Having identified these specific research questions within some areas is helpful. To the extent it is not already being done, the GRA team should be engaging with concurrent research mapping and agenda-setting (particularly as being carried out by USAID, Hewlett, and a group of academics being facilitated by the Brookings Institution).
- c. **Scalable Experiences.** Perhaps due to the economy of not re-iterating the full list of topics under the research section, the attention paid to scaling up experiences seems woefully inadequate. While there is remaining research to be done, the next step in many areas is to start scaling up more of the pilots in the near term. It would seem worth considering whether some of the areas of research need to be reduced in order to reallocate FTI time and resources to scaling up a smaller subset of areas. Even within the timeframe of this first cycle, it seems substantial steps forward can be made to determine which interventions are worth taking to scale to improve learning outcomes in countries.