

COMMENTS on the FTI GRA: LEARNING OUTCOMES
UNICEF, Education Section
August 2011

General

1. We support the paper's embracing the incorporation of issues of language, aspects of the political economy and teachers into the paper on learning outcomes. We support the prioritization of reading as a domain that is an effective entry point for all subject areas. The political economy should include sociocultural barriers to girls and other disadvantaged social groups access to quality education and learning outcomes.
2. You open the discussion with comments from EFA-FTI members who clearly state that Quality Education and Learning Outcomes should be linked in the paper. Though the revised paper does go beyond discussing learning outcomes in isolation, it does not adequately provide a conceptual framework for Quality Education and Learning Outcomes. One of the main reasons why the conceptual framework needs strengthening is because the paper does not adequately build on the work which EFA partners have done in this area for the last 20 years.
3. A case in point is UNICEF's right-based Child-friendly Schools (CFS) framework and its program initiatives in many developing countries provide the opportunity for EFA partners together with government to engage directly at the school level to link all the elements of CFS to learning as an indicator of success. Being a whole-school approach to improving quality, CFS is a good entry point in that it targets the most important determinants of success in learning, as well as learning itself. Also, to the extent that schools constitute a major part of the 'education system', CFSs' whole-child and whole-school improvement approach contributes directly to systems strengthening. Yet there is no mention of the approach in the paper when it is a reality in many countries.
4. The CFS framework being a right-based approach, creates room for different 'duty bearers' to fulfill their obligations towards children. Not only does it require teachers to bear additional responsibilities for non-academic aspects such as the psycho-social wellbeing and safety of children, it also assigns responsibilities to parents and communities. Using what has become a well-oiled CFS machinery in a number of developing countries, parents can be empowered to develop a consensus on what type of results the school should be accountable for, and teach them create a demand for such results, in their communities.
5. The school is identified as the locus of any change in improving learning outcomes, and to strengthen the capacity of schools make accurate judgments about learning. Because of its presence in all developing countries and its accessibility to schools, UNICEF is uniquely positioned to influence school-based policies on assessment of learning outcomes in pursuit of MDGs and EFA goals.
6. We support the fact that the paper embraces the **public accountability approach** to effective reform and improving education practice. To UNICEF, the public accountability approach posits that learning outcomes can improve if citizens are able to influence decision-makers, politicians and education managers when setting education priorities and allocating resources. We propose a strategy for improving quality by focusing on assessing learning outcomes at the school level, and utilizing parents and communities as proponents and agents of school and systems reform. The strategy serves two purposes; first, to demonstrate to parents that schools can deliver the

intended results of providing skills for better livelihoods for them and their children, and that higher performance of students and the school will be attained only if there is a demand for them.

7. UNICEF together with other EFA partners can use its comparative advantage to organize efforts towards creating a demand for higher performance. It also offers a few options that schools, the education system, and the EFA movement can draw from to satisfy the demand for higher performance, and ultimately deliver on quality and learning outcomes.

Linking two assessment approaches

8. UNICEF proposes a two layers system of assessments and depending on the needs of the countries, have them participate in one or both. The first layer is the responsibility of the school; it provides information about the individual learner, and feeds into the school improvements efforts. The other layer addresses the system, but from a point of view of benchmarking and verifying information from school-based assessments. The justification is intuitive; many education practitioners and consumers of school-based information would have come across a situation where children's report cards classify them as high achievers, only to have them perform dismally on national exams. Monitoring learning outcomes serves an important purpose of having schools assess themselves against a national standard. The two assessment approaches have to be linked, either by working with schools to agree on a set of critical learning outcomes for each grade, set performance standards, and to provide prototype items and/or providing them with item banks from which they can draw items for end of grade assessments.

System-wide monitoring studies

9. We concur that the **EFA-FTI should invest in System-wide monitoring studies with emphasis on including the pre-school years.** Already there are International efforts by other players (UNESCO, SAQMEC, etc) *to monitor learning at the level of the system and how is EFA-FTI building on this work and what will be its role... especially in relation to UNESCO?*
10. There is also an urgent need to develop a **regional research agenda** on the determinants of good performance to inform policy, and mobilize resources for it. This means that countries should select partners (other countries) to collaborate with, based on important similarities or differences, perceived strengths of their systems, and lessons countries may want to learn from each other, including certain innovations that they may want to replicate in their own countries
11. **Capacity development and systems strengthening** in the area of learning outcomes EFA-FTI has to articulate its role in relation to other EFA partners. Quality education and learning outcomes move beyond advocating for access and completion to empower parents and communities to demand high levels of achievement from schools, with clear statements of skills sets that children should acquire at the different points in schooling. While this may be a tall order for EFA-FTI members, parents may demand to begin to see a relationship between their investments in education (time, money, opportunity cost) and the promise of better livelihoods for their children.

Upstream policy work

12. Many countries have bodies that have a mandate for assessing learning (examination councils, assessment departments, etc). Most departments routinely produce

information needed for selecting the best learners from primary to secondary school and for **certification purposes only**. For upstream policy work within each country EFA-FTI should discuss **policy alternatives examination councils** with a view of influencing systems to invest in providing credible information that can be used for other purposes – reporting individual performance, monitoring achievement, advancing the agenda of empowering families, schools, and communities and targeting learning outcomes data at the foundational levels of the education system. A related but often neglected area that needs upstream policy work is that of **setting performance standards** for each level, and articulating clear policy positions on issues that will improve the efficiency of the education system (for example, considering the trade-off between reducing repetition rates and increasing graduation rates).