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GPE'S SUPPORT TO REGIONAL NETWORKS ON LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Brief

THE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR EDUCATION (GPE) PRIORITIZES THE IMPROVEMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOMES AND RECOGNIZES THAT THIS GOAL CANNOT BE ACHIEVED WITHOUT DATA ON CHILDREN'S LEARNING. For this reason, the partnership requires partner countries applying for its implementation grants (known as education sector program implementation grants in the previous GPE operating model) to have either a mechanism or system for monitoring learning or a time-bound plan to build such a system or mechanism, or to apply GPE funding for this purpose. This institutional commitment has led to a large majority of GPE implementation grants providing support for different activities aimed at strengthening learning assessment systems.

As a complement to these efforts, GPE implemented the Assessment for Learning (A4L) over a three-year (2017-2020) period with the goals of supporting the strengthening of national learning assessment systems and promoting holistic measures of learning. With funding from two foundations, A4L engaged in a number of activities to develop assessment capacity, improve the use of learning data and promote knowledge sharing around learning assessment and 21st century skills (21CS), also known as transversal competencies. A key component of A4L was to support two regional networks on learning assessment, the [Teaching and Learning: Educators' Network for Transformation \(TALENT\)](#) in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and the [Network on Education Quality Monitoring in the Asia-Pacific \(NEQMAP\)](#) in the Asia-Pacific, to foster regional learning communities on assessment policy and practice.

This brief summarizes the activities and outputs achieved by TALENT and NEQMAP through A4L support and analyzes the outcomes to which this support has contributed and how this is situated vis-à-vis GPE's broader support to strengthening learning assessment systems. The brief has benefited from the findings of an [independent summative evaluation of A4L](#). One of the evaluation's recommendations is that GPE should amplify the research and knowledge products generated by the networks, and this brief is produced in that spirit.

BACKGROUND

TALENT was established in 2016 by the Regional Coordination Group on SDG4-Education 2030 in West and Central Africa (RCG4-WCA), facilitated by the UNESCO Regional Office in Dakar. It is coordinated by UNESCO Dakar and serves SSA countries as a collaboration and coordination platform for promoting knowledge sharing, knowledge generation and capacity building in the areas of teaching and learning assessment. The TALENT membership comprises national institutions in charge of teaching and learning assessment in Sub-Saharan Africa as well as other key institutions and organizations that work in the region on issues related to TALENT's priorities. The network has a steering group with representation from organizations with regional expertise in teaching and assessment.

UNESCO's Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education (UNESCO Bangkok) established NEQMAP in 2013 to support better alignment between assessment, curriculum and pedagogy through capacity development, research and knowledge sharing across the region. NEQMAP members are diverse and wide-ranging, including national ministries of education, assessment and evaluation bodies, universities, research centers, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), foundations, regional and subregional organizations, and individual experts. NEQMAP's steering group consists of experts in education quality and assessment and meets annually to set the priorities for the network. NEQMAP has been a recipient of GPE funding since 2014 (through the Global and Regional Activities initiative prior to A4L).

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Through A4L support, NEQMAP was able to continue its valuable work in the Asia-Pacific, while TALENT was able to address capacity needs in the area of learning assessment in Sub-Saharan Africa. The accomplishments of both networks in the areas of capacity development, research and knowledge sharing, as supported by A4L, are outlined below.

ACTIVITIES & OUTPUTS SUPPORTED BY A4L

Capacity development

Through the A4L grants, TALENT and NEQMAP each successfully organized four regional workshops, with an aim of developing country-level capacity in various dimensions of learning assessment. The workshops covered content relevant for improving each region's ability to effectively use learning data to improve outcomes, including topics such as assessment system alignment, formative assessment, reporting and use of large-scale assessments, the development and use of national assessments, data quality, contextual data and measuring transversal competencies.

The TALENT network organized four workshops targeting government officials responsible for learning assessment or other areas (as well as other stakeholders such as researchers, regional and international experts and others). Cumulatively, these workshops reached 234 participants from 33 SSA countries, including 32 of GPE's 38 partner countries in the region. In the Asia-Pacific, NEQMAP also organized four workshops and one online training course targeting a similar profile of participants. These workshops/trainings reached 216 participants from 24 countries of the Asia-Pacific, including 15 GPE partner countries. Table 1 gives further details on both networks' workshops, with the agenda, presentations and other documentation of each workshop available via the links provided.

In addition, both networks carried out online learning courses on assessment of 21CS. TALENT organized an [online learning series](#) in collaboration with the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (UNESCO-IIEP) on the integration of 21CS in teaching and learning. This course was composed of three modules, each of which focused on one aspect of 21CS integration and included a webinar and course readings. The series is still available online for anyone who is interested in the topic. NEQMAP, in partnership with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), also carried out an online course on 21CS integration, focused on alignment analysis and strategic planning. This course provided countries with the support to develop a strategic plan for 21CS integration and resources to support the implementation of that plan. These online courses reached a large number of participants from many countries of each region.

TABLE 1: TALENT AND NEQMAP REGIONAL CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS ORGANIZED THROUGH A4L SUPPORT

Title	Date	Location	# of countries represented	Countries
TALENT				
<u>Curriculum Alignment, Teacher Training and Learning Assessments</u>	July 25–27, 2018	Dar es Salaam, Tanzania	19 (all partner countries)	Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Chad, Central African Republic, Comoros, The Gambia, Ethiopia, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Niger, Lesotho, Senegal, South Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda
<u>Effective Reporting, Dissemination and Use of Large-Scale Learning Assessments</u>	November 23–27, 2018	Dakar, Senegal	18 (17 partner countries)	Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Chad, Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Guinea, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe
<u>Classroom-Based Formative Assessment</u>	July 2–4, 2019	Addis Abba, Ethiopia	15 (all partner countries)	Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tanzania, Togo
<u>Development and Strategic Use of National Large-Scale Assessments</u>	December 3–5, 2019	Yaoundé, Cameroon	12 (all partner countries)	Cameroon, Chad, Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Mali, Tanzania, Zimbabwe
NEQMAP				
<u>Data Quality and Accuracy for Large-Scale Learning Assessment Programmes</u>	March 12–15, 2018	Bangkok, Thailand	22 (14 partner countries)	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Tajikistan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Uzbekistan, Vietnam
<u>Conceptualization, Measurement and Use of Contextual Data</u>	September 10–13, 2018	Penang, Malaysia	23 (14 partner countries)	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kyrgyz Republic, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Uzbekistan, Vietnam
<u>School-Based, Classroom, Teacher, Formative Assessment</u>	June 24–27, 2019	Bandung, Indonesia	14 (7 partner countries)	Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan, Vietnam
<u>Promoting Transversal Competencies across Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment</u>	September 16–19, 2019	Manila, Philippines	14 (7 partner countries)	Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Fiji, India, Iran, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan, Vietnam

Research

Through the support from A4L, both networks engaged in research aiming to expand the knowledge base on learning assessment in their respective regions. The research activities included mapping studies, thematic reviews, case studies and cross-country research on a number of themes. Typically, the networks' research work touched on

areas such as assessment of 21CS or "transversal competencies," assessment in relation to issues such as gender, language and disability, and the use and impact of assessment. Table 2 details the specific research outputs/knowledge products achieved through A4L support, with links to the publications noted.

TABLE 2: TALENT AND NEQMAP KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTS PRODUCED THROUGH A4L SUPPORT

TALENT	
Learning Assessments in Sub-Saharan Africa	In 2019, 37 countries (32 partner countries) were surveyed on their policies around the administration and use of national large-scale assessments (NLSAs), and this publication summarizes the findings. Some highlights are that the administration of NLSAs has been steadily rising since 2005, that most countries note using NLSAs to monitor and evaluate learning outcomes and that at least 10 countries report that their NLSAs measure 21CS/transversal competencies.
Capturing 21st Century Skills: Analysis of Assessments in Selected Sub-Saharan African Countries	Through the support of TALENT and under the leadership of the Brookings Institution, "mini-studies" were conducted on the assessment of 21CS in Sub-Saharan Africa. The findings suggest that while most assessment tools were not directly measuring 21CS, many possessed the potential to capture these skills.
Effective Use of Large-Scale Assessments to Improve Learning Outcomes and Education System Reforms	TALENT conducted an analysis on the SSA region's use of learning assessment data to improve learning outcomes. The study found that SSA countries struggle with an insufficient learning database and limited technical capacity. It also proposes several measures to strengthen the use of data to improve educational quality and student outcomes.
Advocacy paper: Levels of Learning are Alarming Low	This paper was originally drafted in preparation of the roundtable on teaching and learning at the Pan-African Conference on Education that took place in April 2018 in Nairobi. It was subsequently transformed into an advocacy piece aimed at mobilizing the education community and stakeholders around a few key measures to tackle the learning crisis, including strengthening national learning assessment systems and aligning assessment with teaching and curriculum.
Mapping the Distance Learning Assessments during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa	This resource provides results from a survey on the status of learning assessments during the period of school closures and guidelines on formative assessment in the context of distance education during this time.

Continued:

TABLE 2: TALENT AND NEQMAP KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTS PRODUCED THROUGH A4L SUPPORT

NEQMAP	
Topical case studies on the use of learning assessments	NEQMAP conducted two additional case studies in its series on the use of specific learning assessment programs in jurisdictions of the Asia-Pacific, in partnership with ACER. The studies focused on the national assessment in Nepal as well as the deeply integrative capacity-building approach of the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics Program (SEA-PLM) regional assessment.
Thematic reviews on various elements of learning assessment	NEQMAP conducted five thematic reviews on specific topics in regard to learning assessment: (1) equitable learning assessments for students with disabilities ; (2) removing learning barriers in learning assessments ; (3) gender equity, equality and learning assessments ; (4) high-stakes examinations and large-scale learning assessments in times of emergencies and crises ; and (5) formative assessments and the continuity of learning during emergencies and crises . The latter two reviews were undertaken in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the school closures that this has engendered in the region.
Assessment of Transversal Competencies: Current Tools in the Asian Region	Similar to TALENT, NEQMAP supported the Brookings Institution in conducting a review of current classroom assessment tools that measure transversal competencies in late primary to early secondary grade levels in the region. This research found that, similar to as in Sub-Saharan Africa, assessment tools in the Asia-Pacific were not designed to measure transversal competencies, but that they can be repurposed to achieve this objective.
Large-Scale Learning Assessments in Asia-Pacific: A Mapping of Country Policies and Practices	In an effort to collect information on the policies and practices around learning assessments at different levels of government, NEQMAP conducted a mapping study to examine the use of various types of assessments among 24 countries in the Asia-Pacific. A key finding from the study highlights that while national assessments and public examinations are the most popular forms of assessments, regional and international assessment participation rates are rapidly increasing, nearly tripling since 2005 alone.

Knowledge sharing

As networks that bring together countries of the two respective regions, both TALENT and NEQMAP place strong emphasis on promoting knowledge exchange and peer learning. A4L supported specific activities focused on knowledge sharing for both networks,

including the establishment and/or enhancement of knowledge portals on learning assessment, webinars and special seminars, newsletters and annual convenings. Table 3 offers a summary of these activities, with relevant links provided.

TABLE 3: TALENT AND NEQMAP KNOWLEDGE-SHARING ACTIVITIES CONDUCTED THROUGH A4L SUPPORT

Knowledge-sharing activities	
TALENT	NEQMAP
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ TALENT Knowledge Exchange Platform ➤ Discussion forum on teacher training and professional development ➤ Online training course on alignment of curriculum, teacher training and learning assessment ➤ Two regional meetings for national teams of the Brookings' Optimizing Assessment for All (OAA) initiative and two regional webinars (in French and in English) on the methodology and sampling process ➤ The first TALENT newsletter (August 2020) in English and in French ➤ Online Learning Series on Integration of 21st Century Skills in collaboration with UNESCO IIEP ➤ Three webinars: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of learning assessment data, in collaboration with UNESCO-IIEP • Conducting assessments during school closures (one in English and one in French), in collaboration with UNESCO-IICBA • Large-Scale Assessments: Dimensions and Opportunities, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education of Angola 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Updated NEQMAP Knowledge Portal ➤ Three annual network and steering group meetings (2018, 2019, 2020) ➤ Four editions of biannual newsletter (June 2018, December 2018, July 2019, December 2019) as well as numerous stand-alone articles authored by NEQMAP members ➤ Three regional meetings for national teams of OAA, each organized back-to-back with NEQMAP capacity development workshops ➤ Special seminar on lessons for education development in East Asia in collaboration with the World Bank ➤ Six webinars: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computer-based assessments (with International Association for Educational Assessment - IAEA) • Culture of Testing: Sociocultural Impacts on Learning in Asia and the Pacific • Learning disabilities (with IAEA) • Introducing NEQMAP Strategy in Strengthening the Quality of Education in Asia-Pacific • Developing Curriculum and Assessment Systems for 21st Century Skills (with UNICEF) • Curriculum Implementation: Competency-Based Learning and the Alignment of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment (with the GPE Knowledge and Innovation Exchange EAP hub)

OUTCOMES

The recent [independent summative evaluation of A4L](#) as well as a [program evaluation of NEQMAP](#) both found that countries and institutions participating in the activities of the two networks had the opportunity to gain technical knowledge, share examples of best practices and learn from the experiences of others. Regarding the workshops specifically, the A4L evaluation noted that they facilitated “peer learning as well as an awareness of best practices and intervention strategies from countries facing similar hurdles in strengthening learning assessment systems.” The workshops were said to be “relevant, responsive and aligned” with country needs and interests and to promote “systematic knowledge exchange between countries rather than ad hoc arrangements.”¹ This was the case for both countries at a more nascent stage as well as those with more well-established systems.

Government officials who participated in these workshops noted particular appreciation for the learning that the workshops fostered on issues of alignment (between curricula, teacher training and assessment), creating an unique opportunity for officials responsible for these three areas to come together and thereafter continue collaborating in a sustained way. They also appreciated the opportunity to gain familiarity with key terminology and concepts concerning 21CS and to learn how different countries are working to integrate these skills in curricula and assessment. This was said to have contributed to a “better understanding of how assessment may be used for policy change” and “a better understanding of the issues of one’s own country and ... a desire to bring about change.”²

The A4L support to the networks thus allowed participating countries to gain insight on different models and frameworks for strengthening learning assessment systems and to make valuable connections in support of this work. This is all the more significant given that most donors do not show interest in facilitating such links and capacity development at the regional level, though countries strongly endorse the idea of peer learning in this manner. In addition, there is evidence that some countries have used the knowledge gained from their engagement with the networks to drive policies and reforms at the country level. For example, participants from Bhutan noted that their participation in NEQMAP workshops on item development, sampling, test administration and dissemination informed the development of the country’s first national education assessment framework, through GPE support. Cambodia has also worked to enhance its assessment framework and improve communication among different units of its education ministry, driven by learnings from NEQMAP workshops along with other factors.

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1 L. Read and K. Anderson, *Summative Evaluation of GPE’s Assessment for Learning (A4L) Initiative* (Washington, DC: Unbounded Associates, 2021).

2 M. A. Jyothi, *NEQMAP Programme Evaluation Report: From March 2013 – June 2019* (Bangkok: UNESCO, 2019).

GPE'S BROADER SUPPORT TO LEARNING ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS

The A4L support to TALENT and NEQMAP has occurred in the context of GPE's broader support to learning assessment systems at the country level. Between 2016 and 2020, learning was the largest investment area for the partnership, with a total of US\$775 million in funding allocated to activities designed primarily to improve learning. In regard to learning assessment systems specifically, the implementation grants active as of the end of FY20 allocated \$61.2 million to this area, and a thematic study in the area revealed that 31 out of 36 grants active in 2018 supported interventions on learning assessment specifically. This includes support for a variety of activities, including establishment of entities charged with coordinating assessment programs, development of item banks, administration of national assessments, reform of examinations and participation in cross-national assessments.

It is thus not surprising that during the period of the A4L support to TALENT and NEQMAP, GPE partner countries made progress in the quality of their learning assessment systems. Indicator 15 of GPE's results framework measures the proportion of partner countries with a learning assessment system within the basic education cycle that meets quality standards, and while only 40 percent of partner countries met these standards in 2015, 48 percent did so in 2020. The progress is even more notable in partner countries facing fragility and conflict: Only 25 percent met the standards at baseline in 2015, but 36 percent did so in 2020.³

While it is impossible to ascertain the extent to which any single activity—including the A4L support to TALENT and NEQMAP—contributes to the progress being made in this area, it is notable that countries which have engaged in the networks have noted their enhanced knowledge and capacity and specific ways in which they have translated this into change at the country level.

In addition, it is worth noting that the networks have served as valuable regional platforms for GPE to engage with partner countries in the two regions on assessment issues. For example, TALENT and NEQMAP organized consultations on the sidelines of the regional workshops to enable GPE to consult its partner countries on how to develop a strategy around its Knowledge and Innovation Exchange initiative to continue supporting the strengthening of learning assessment systems. The networks have also facilitated data collection on indicator 15 (as well as indicator 1 on improvement of learning outcomes), supported verification of information and reporting to GPE donors on assessment issues and provided support in identifying suitable countries and speakers for webinars and other engagements. In this way, the networks serve as a vital conduit for the GPE Secretariat and the partnership as a whole to collate and share information and to engage with partner countries on assessment issues.

Looking forward, GPE's current strategic plan (GPE 2025) places a strong emphasis on improving learning. The new GPE operating model offers a number of mechanisms to advance this agenda, such as funding for diagnostics and enhanced capacity for learning assessment systems, including for data collection. The approach to requirements and incentives will include a continued requirement on the availability and use of learning data and incentives for improved data where this is a challenge, while the partnership will also support investments aiming to lead to equitable learning, including results-based financing to incentivize policy reforms in this area. Building from the accomplishments supported through A4L, TALENT and NEQMAP will continue to be important strategic partners in supporting the strengthening of learning assessment systems in the two regions and in enhancing GPE's global work in this area.

3 Global Partnership for Education (GPE), *Results Report 2019* (Washington, DC: GPE, 2019); GPE, *Results Report 2021* (Washington, DC: GPE, forthcoming).

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