

Students complete a lesson in their workbooks at the Shree Kankalini Secondary School in Hanumannagar Kankalini Municipality in Saptari District, Nepal.
UNICEF Nepal/Laxmi-Prasad-Ngakhusi

CHAPTER 3

MEASURING CHILDREN'S LEARNING: THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE, GPE SUPPORT AND ENDURING CHALLENGES



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Between 2015 and 2022, at least 185 large-scale learning assessments (mostly national assessments) took place in 63 GPE partner countries, at primary and secondary levels.
- Learning assessments tend to be ad hoc rather than conducted regularly as part of a coherent system. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted assessments, particularly in 2020–22.
- GPE supports learning assessment systems through grant funding and global initiatives:
 - GPE's focus on learning assessment systems has continued under GPE 2025, and all partnership compacts include measures to conduct learning assessments or to strengthen learning assessment systems.
 - In 2024, GPE grants supported learning assessment systems in 65 partner countries, up from 57 in 2023.
 - GPE initiatives like the Knowledge and Innovation Exchange and Education Out Loud contribute to strengthening learning assessment systems by supporting cross-national knowledge and advocacy initiatives, particularly those related to citizen-led assessments.
- Many challenges persist in relation to measuring children's learning. They include the affordability of learning assessments and carrying out assessments that meet the minimum quality standards for international reporting. Of the 63 countries with assessments, 34 reported at least one learning data point to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics between 2015 and 2022; however, about half of GPE partner countries that conducted large-scale assessments between 2015 and 2022 did not report on any of the components of Sustainable Development Goal indicator 4.1.1.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the status of learning assessment systems in GPE partner countries and GPE's role in strengthening those systems.

For several years, the global community has been sounding the alarm about a “learning crisis.” In low- and middle-income countries, learning poverty (the share of 10-year-olds who cannot read and comprehend a simple reading passage) is estimated to have surged from 57 percent in 2020 to 70 percent in 2022, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵³ Lack of regularly available quality data impedes the education community's understanding of the status of learning and the solutions it can deploy to make education systems more effective.

Despite the effort that countries have put into monitoring Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 indicators, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) estimates that the level of learning outcomes is unknown for about 680 million of the 1.6 billion children of primary and secondary school age globally.⁵⁴ The gap in international data is driven by partner countries' lack of learning assessment systems able to generate information on children's learning outcomes that is both reliable and comparable over time.

At a crucial juncture when the sector needs to demonstrate results to make the case for education, the dearth of data on outcomes is increasingly problematic. The time is ripe for increased attention to this issue, built upon a better understanding of the status of learning assessments in partner countries. That understanding must include the extent to which countries report data from such assessments (notably on minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics) to UIS, the challenges encountered in developing learning assessment systems and the partnership's role in strengthening them.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE: PARTNER COUNTRY PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING ASSESSMENTS

As highlighted earlier, the lack of reliable data in many partner countries on children's learning outcomes creates a significant barrier to addressing the learning crisis. Across partner countries that conduct learning assessments, issues with quality and comparability over time mean the data cannot be used to track progress in learning outcomes. The lack of tracking in turn impedes their international reporting of this data.

However, between 2015 and 2022, 63 partner countries (or 72 percent of partner countries) participated in at least 185 large-scale learning assessments—most of which were national learning assessments (figure 3.1).⁵⁵ Low-income partner countries participated in about a third of those large-scale assessments. About 72 percent (134 out of 185) of the assessments were conducted in partner countries not affected by fragility or conflict (non-PCFCs). Forty-six out of the 63 partner countries that participated in a large-scale learning assessment conducted more than one assessment in 2015–22 (figure 3.2).⁵⁶

⁵³ World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, FCDO, USAID, and BMGF, *The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update*, (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022). <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e52f55322528903b27f1b7e61238e416-0200022022/original/Learning-poverty-report-2022-06-21-final-V7-0-conferenceEdition.pdf>.

⁵⁴ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), “Learning levels unknown for over half a billion children. A new education data ecosystem is needed,” *World Education Blog*, February 7, 2024 (updated February 16, 2024), <https://world-education-blog.org/2024/02/07/learning-levels-unknown-for-over-half-a-billion-children-a-new-education-data-ecosystem-is-needed/#more-33745>.

⁵⁵ Refer to chapter 1 for a discussion of learning outcomes trends.

⁵⁶ A closer analysis of those assessments is essential to establish their over-time comparability and their potential use in tracking progress in learning outcomes.

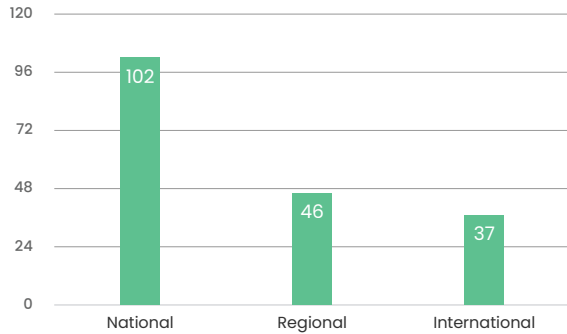


FIGURE 3.1.

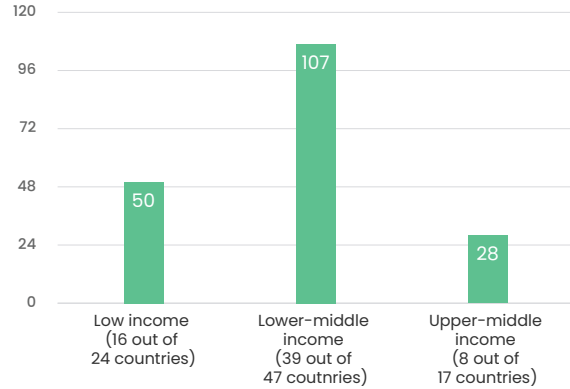
Partner countries participated mostly in national learning assessments from 2015 to 2022.

Total number of learning assessments in partner countries, by type of assessment, country income level and fragility status, 2015–22

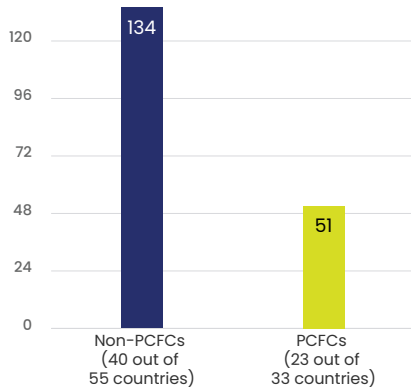
a) by type of assessment



b) by country income



c) by fragility status



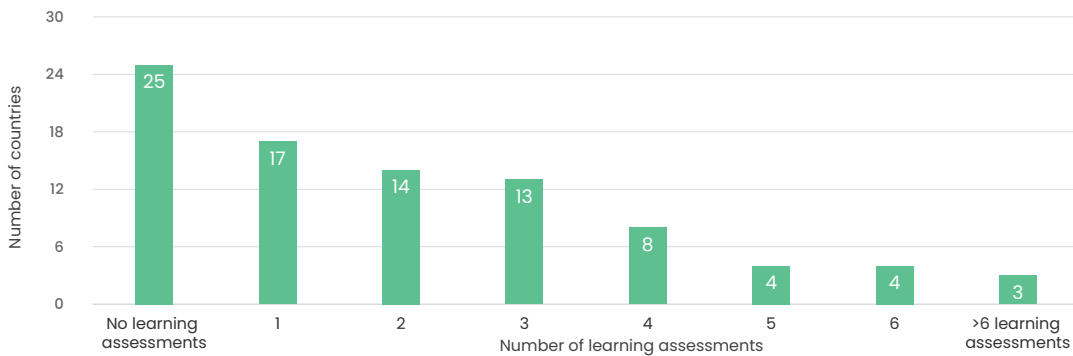
Source: GPE Secretariat

Note: The GPE Secretariat collects data on learning assessments from publicly available sources. The original database, developed for Indicator 1 of the GPE 2020 results framework, has been updated for this chapter. However, the data presented here should be interpreted cautiously, because the current data collection may not reflect some assessments that occurred but were not made publicly available. Global Partnership for Education (GPE), *GPE Results Framework for 2016–2020*, (Washington, DC: GPE, 2019), <https://www.globalpartnership.org/content/gpe-results-framework-2016-2020>.

FIGURE 3.2.

Some partner countries participated in more than one large-scale learning assessment from 2015 to 2022.

Number of countries and number of learning assessments conducted, 2015–22



Source: GPE Secretariat

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing widespread school closures made it more difficult for partner countries to administer learning assessments, particularly those planned for 2020, 2021 and 2022. For instance, Bangladesh, Guinea and Uzbekistan chose to postpone the planned assessments, whereas Comoros, The Gambia and Uganda canceled them. Consequently, the number of learning assessments in partner countries declined from 55 in 2019 to only five in 2022 (figure 3.3). The pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital assessment tools and platforms in general; however, most partner countries (especially low-income countries) could not take advantage of those new opportunities because of limited access to technology and internet connectivity, particularly in rural and underserved areas.⁵⁷

GPE SUPPORT TO LEARNING ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS

GPE supports partner countries to establish and improve learning assessment systems. This support focuses on the technical and operational capabilities to conduct learning assessments as well as the policies and institutions that sustain their conduct and use for decision making.

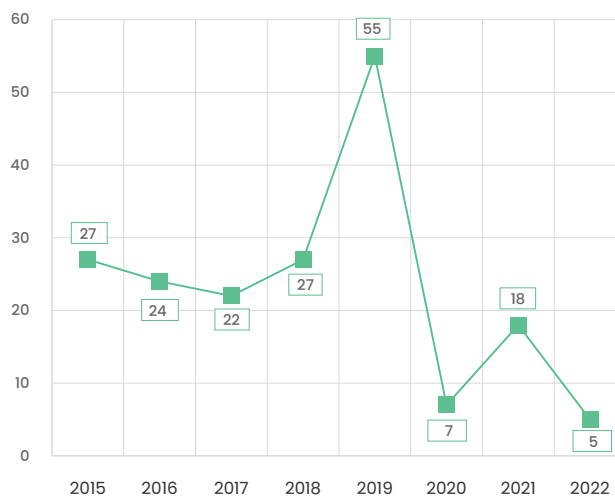
GPE has supported learning assessment systems through various initiatives over the years. During the GPE 2020 period, the funding model specifically required partner countries applying for an implementation grant to have either a system in place to monitor learning outcomes or a plan to develop one. If countries had insufficient funding to meet that requirement, the expectation was that GPE funding would be used to finance the development of such a system.

GPE grant funding has thus historically supported many different activities regarding learning assessment systems, and an indicator in the GPE 2020 results framework monitored the quality of countries' systems. An analysis of 81 implementation grants approved before or during GPE 2020 and that closed between 2015 and 2023 shows that 38 grants in 35 partner countries included results indicators related to strengthening learning assessment systems and that 97 percent of those grants (37 out of 38) met the corresponding targets. Examples of the targets include establishing a policy for district-level learning assessments in Malawi and increasing the quality and frequency of learning assessments in Mozambique. The targets, however, did not require reporting learning assessment data to UIS.

FIGURE 3.3.

The number of learning assessments in partner countries fell between 2019 and 2022.

Number of learning assessments per year in partner countries, 2015–22



Source: GPE Secretariat

In addition to those implementation grants, the COVID-19 accelerated funding grants approved during the pandemic in 2020 invested about \$6.7 million in learning assessment activities, through 36 grants. A global grant under the COVID-19 grant window also supported work in this area, notably the development of an add-on module (known as Monitoring Impacts on Learning Outcomes, or MILO) that allowed 6 countries in Africa to measure learning loss (if any) and report on SDG indicator 4.1.1.

The support to learning assessment continues under GPE 2025. All partnership compacts under GPE 2025 incorporate interventions related to learning assessment systems. In two-thirds of the partnership compacts analyzed (38 out of 57), the learning assessment-related interventions were developed in response to gaps identified through the data availability and use analysis, which is part of the compact development process. For example, in São Tomé and Príncipe, the analysis revealed that inadequate dissemination and discussion of education data prevented learning assessment results from informing decision making. Consequently, a key action identified was the introduction of a consolidated calendar of periodic assessments that are benchmarked to a proficiency scale and provide comparable data over time to motivate education stakeholders to discuss and utilize learning assessment results.

⁵⁷ N. Hossain, "Learning Assessments: Critical Tools for Improving Educational Outcomes," *International Journal of Educational Development* 82, 102350 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102350>.

As a result, GPE implementation grants continued to support learning assessments in 2024. Of the 119 implementation grants and accelerated funding grants active in 2024, 77 supported learning assessments in 65 partner countries. The total allocation to learning assessments amounted to \$113 million. Overall, grant allocation to learning assessments as a share of the total grant amount remained constant at about 3.6 percent between 2022 and 2024.

In addition, GPE's funding model also directly incentivizes improvements in learning assessment systems. In countries that place a high priority on addressing gaps in the learning assessment system, a part of the system transformation grant allocation can be made contingent on addressing such gaps. For instance, in Liberia 5 percent of the system transformation grant allocation of \$19.5 million⁵⁸ is contingent on completing

a national learning assessment at the primary level and disseminating its results. The system transformation grant complements that incentive by financing (1) a sample-based school readiness assessment to identify critical gaps in early development and learning and (2) a nationally representative assessment to measure minimum proficiency levels in grade 3. It also supports the Ministry of Education's capacity to conduct and use learning assessments through training on assessment planning, coordination, administration and security, and the use of assessment findings for planning, resource allocation and decision making.

Alongside country-specific support for learning assessments, GPE implements a range of cross-national initiatives to strengthen learning assessments through the GPE Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) and Education Out Loud (box 3.1).

BOX 3.1. GPE's cross-national initiatives to strengthen learning assessment systems

Other GPE support at regional and global levels to strengthen learning assessment systems has included knowledge generation and exchange via GPE KIX and advocacy and accountability for learning data via Education Out Loud.

KIX funds two applied research projects on learning assessment. One supports the implementation of the Citizen Led Assessment of Numeracy in 11 African and Asian countries, which is a digitally adaptive common-scale math assessment tool developed by Pratham. The other project scales the Assessment of Life Skills and Values in East Africa, which assesses 21st-century skills and provides assessment data to improve curricula. It is implemented in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda by the Global e-Schools and Communities Initiative, Makerere University's College of Education and External Studies, and the University of Notre Dame. Separately, KIX Hubs have conducted over 15 activities on learning assessment and learning assessments systems, including a multipart webinar series for policy makers in Latin America and the Caribbean, a peer-learning exchange between ministry officials of Kenya and Uganda, and a policy stakeholder webinar in Asia-Pacific.

Education Out Loud has funded the South Asia Assessment Alliance, led by Street Child. It has promoted citizen-led learning assessments in four countries. Those efforts are used as a tool for policy and advocacy for national commitments on quality education. Similar initiatives by national education coalitions have also contributed to improving learning outcomes within various marginalized communities.

In addition, under GPE's past Assessment for Learning (A4L) initiative, GPE developed a tool to support comprehensive analysis of learning assessment systems known as the ANLAS (Analysis of National Learning Assessment) framework and toolkit.^a The ANLAS tool is available in three languages and has been used in a few countries, with potential for broader application.

a. For more information, refer to the ANLAS web page, <https://www.globalpartnership.org/content/toolkit-analysis-national-learning-assessment-systems-anlas>.

⁵⁸ This amount is 70 percent of the total system transformation grant allocation; release of the remaining 30 percent is conditioned on the GPE Board's decision that top-up triggers have been achieved.

ENDURING CHALLENGES

In many countries, learning assessments tend to be ad hoc, one-off evaluations. The broader **context** (including legislation or policy mandating the regular conduct of assessments, institutional arrangements such as an assessment unit, sustainable funding and leadership) may not be conducive for implementing learning assessments and reporting the data. **Coherence** with the broader education system, including system priorities and structure, learning standards and curriculum, and the broader data architecture of the country, may be limited. The **quality** of assessments (including examinations, national assessments and classroom-level assessment) may vary, with teachers and school leaders not engaged or supported as active stakeholders in the process. These three elements are articulated further in GPE's ANLAS manual and toolkit.⁵⁹

Support to partner countries during the GPE 2025 period has provided a more nuanced understanding of the particular challenges those countries face. As mentioned, development of the partnership compact involves assessment of a country's data and evidence landscape, which includes an assessment of country data systems.⁶⁰ A summary of the assessments undertaken for various partner countries reveals several commonalities:

- > A lack of alignment between learning assessment data and a country's education management information system
- > A plethora of different, ad hoc assessments that are fragmented and inconsistent
- > A lack of assessment data that are comparable over time
- > The underutilization of existing data and gaps in funding, capacity and policy/frameworks for assessment.

In addition, there are some specific challenges that merit a particular focus, notably the affordability of learning assessments and ensuring that they meet the minimum quality standards for international reporting.

AFFORDABILITY OF LEARNING ASSESSMENTS

Assessments obviously imply a cost. With the expansion of large-scale learning assessments worldwide has come increased attention to the financial implications of those assessments in low-income countries. External donors, including bilateral partners and multilateral agencies, have often covered the costs of those assessments in low- and middle-income countries. Despite their cost, the assessments can offer high value for money because their cost is still relatively low compared to the total education budget⁶¹ and they play a critical role in guiding the design of policies to improve learning.⁶²

The costs of national learning assessments depend on factors such as the number of students tested, grade level and mode of administration. According to UIS, the cost of conducting a national assessment ranges from \$200,000 to \$1 million per cycle of assessment.⁶³ Although often a small share of most education budgets, that cost can represent a significant figure in other contexts. For instance, in Liberia, where the government spent \$21 million for primary education and \$14 million for secondary education in 2021,⁶⁴ allocating \$200,000 to \$1 million to a learning assessment for each level of education would represent a significant share of the education budget.

The costs of regional and international learning assessments are similar but require international fees in addition (payable to the Conference of Ministers of Education of French-speaking Countries (COMFEMEN), International Association for the Evaluation of

⁵⁹ Refer also to Global Partnership for Education (GPE), "Analysis of National Learning Assessment Systems (ANLAS): Manual," (Washington, DC: GPE, October 2019), <https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/docs/2020-11-GPE-ANLAS-manual.pdf>.

⁶⁰ An enabling factor analysis is conducted as part of the partnership compact development process. That analysis identifies critical factors that either facilitate or hinder the implementation of the priority reform included in the partnership compact.

⁶¹ J. A. Peyser and R. M. Costrell, "Exploring the Costs of Accountability: No Child Left Behind Is No Unfunded Mandate," *Education Next* 4, no. 2 (2004), <https://www.educationnext.org/exploring-the-costs-of-accountability/>; C. M. Hoxby, "The Cost of Accountability," NBER Working Paper No. 8855, (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2002), https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w8855/w8855.pdf.

⁶² H. I. Braun and A. Kanjee, "Using Assessment to Improve Education in Developing Nations," In *Research Methods in Educational Leadership and Management*, edited by A. R. J. Briggs and M. Coleman, 235–51, (SAGE Publications, 2006).

⁶³ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), *Quick Guide No. 3: Implementing a National Learning Assessment*, (Montreal: UIS, 2018), <https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/quick-guide-3-implementing-national-learning-assessment.pdf>.

⁶⁴ S. Antoninis, "On the way forward for SDG indicator 4.1.1a: Supporting countries' development needs," *World Education Blog*, March 26, 2024, <https://world-education-blog.org/2024/03/26/on-the-way-forward-for-sdg-indicator-4-1-1a-supporting-countries-development-needs/>.

Educational Achievement (IEA), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and others). Fees can vary widely, depending on the type of assessment, the geographic coverage and the scope. As with national assessments, when compared to government education spending per student, the cost of learning assessments may not present a significant barrier to the availability of learning data for many countries. In other countries with relatively small education budgets and scarce national resources, however, addressing the learning data challenge may require external financial support. In addition, and as noted earlier, the cost-effectiveness of assessments largely depends on whether they are relevant and used to drive concrete policy or programs. That being the case, assessments are a cost-effective investment.

CARRYING OUT ASSESSMENTS THAT MEET MINIMUM QUALITY STANDARDS FOR INTERNATIONAL REPORTING

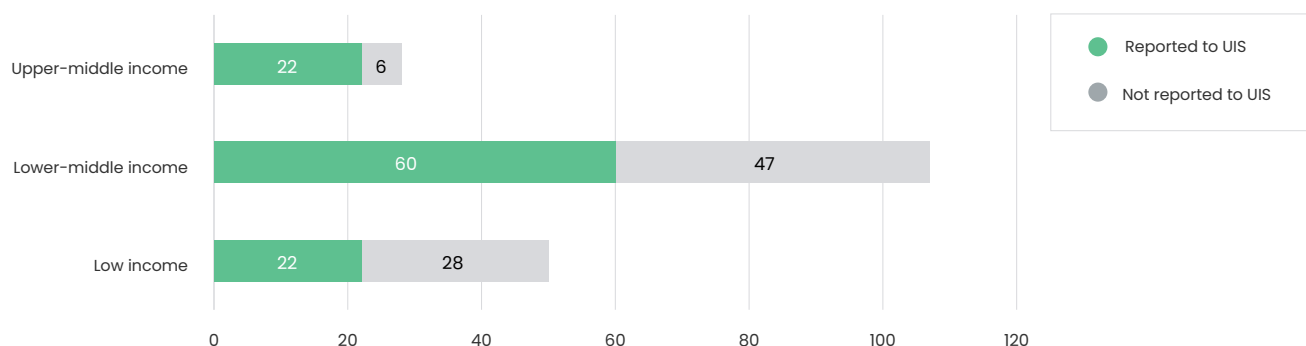
Notably, about half of the partner countries that participated in or conducted large-scale assessments in 2015–22 did not report on any of the components of SDG indicator 4.1.1 to UIS, the custodian agency for the data. Out of 63 partner countries with a learning assessment in 2015–22, only 34 reported at least one learning data point to UIS on reading or mathematics for early grades, end of primary or lower secondary. The remaining 29 partner countries (19 lower-middle-income countries, eight low-income countries and two upper-middle-income countries) participated in at least one large-scale learning assessment but did not report any data to UIS (figure 3.4). Of the countries participating but not reporting data, 12 are PCFCs. A key reason for the lack of reporting is quality gaps that prevent assessments from being aligned to the standards established for international reporting.

FIGURE 3.4.

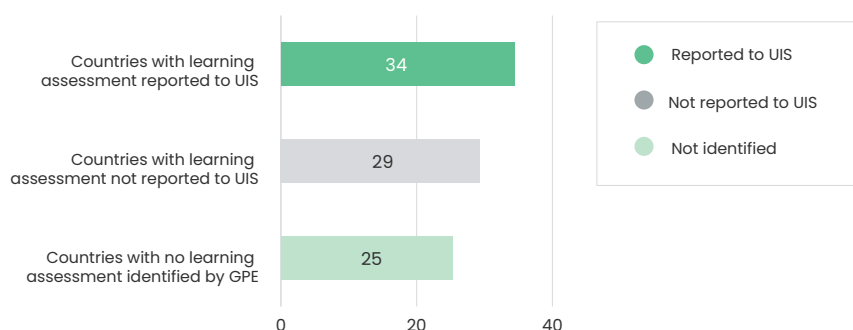
Over half of partner countries conducting large-scale learning assessments reported learning data to UIS.

Number of partner countries that reported learning data to UIS, by income level and whether a learning assessment was conducted, 2015–22

a) Number of learning assessments in partner countries



b) Partner countries with learning assessments by SDG 4.1.1 reporting



Source: GPE Secretariat

TOWARD STRONGER LEARNING ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS IN PARTNER COUNTRIES

Easily accessible quality data on children's learning are imperative for achieving quality education for all children. Although several countries have conducted learning assessments, those countries do not regularly report the data according to international standards. That situation could indicate several issues, including insufficient resources to measure learning outcomes and assessments not meeting quality standards.

Strengthening and institutionalizing learning assessment systems in partner countries are therefore essential for improving the availability and use of learning data across the partnership. Providing adequate financial and technical resources, incentivizing alignment to international standards and harmonizing learning assessments can help ensure data availability and comparability

over time and across countries. Additionally, promoting transparency about different assessment providers and supporting countries to make the best choices would contribute to more informed decision making and better learning data overall.

GPE grants are increasingly supporting learning assessments systems. The GPE 2025 operating model incentivizes countries to identify the main bottlenecks to their data systems and design appropriate reforms. Other GPE initiatives such as KIX and Education Out Loud also support knowledge production and advocacy for stronger learning assessment systems.

Continued investment in learning assessment systems is needed to ensure the availability of quality learning data to track progress against the GPE 2025 strategic goal and the SDG indicators. In this regard, the partnership needs a systematic focus on learning assessments that meet quality standards.

